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ABSTRACT

This document presents findings of a 9-month study conducted by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) that explores: the statistical relationships among attendance, truancy, and student performance in examinations; the impact of truancy on students, teachers, and teaching; and factors of truancy in seven primary and seven secondary schools in two local authority areas. Data were gathered through interviews with 7 primary and 7 secondary headteachers, 14 primary teachers, and 28 secondary teachers; questionnaires administered to 299 primary students and 76 secondary students; followup interviews with 8 secondary students; telephone interviews with 18 parents; and analysis of attendance records and grade reports. In every school but one, pupil absences were more likely to be "explained" than "unexplained." During the first two terms of 1993-94 at least 89 percent of pupils in each school registered some explained absence. As the level of absence increased among fourth-year secondary students, the level of grade award decreased; however, there was considerable variation among schools. Explained absence and unexplained absence had comparable effects on attainment. Secondary-school truants reported that they skipped school because they were bored with school and would rather be earning money at work. A total of 17 tables, 2 figures, and the evaluation instruments are included. (LMI)

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Understanding Truancy

Links between attendance, truancy and performance

Heather Malcolm
Graham Thorpe
Kevin Lowden

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Heather Malcolm
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Last, we would like to thank colleagues at SCRE, in particular David Whitcombe, for assistance with computing, Gillian Doherty for help with the statistics, Jennie Jackson, the project secretary, for her valued input over the lifetime of the project, as well as Joan Ballantine, who helped with last-minute changes.

Glossary of Acronyms and Terms Used

Education Authority	See Region
Guidance teacher	A secondary school teacher with responsibility for the pastoral care of a number of pupils. The numbers of guidance teachers in a school will vary according to the size of the school.
National Certificate	National Certificate courses are primarily concerned with vocational subjects or personal and social development. They consist of modules, or short courses, normally up to 40 hours in length, which can be taken in various combinations. National Certificate courses were initially designed to provide the curriculum in non-advanced colleges of further education, but since 1985, when they were introduced to schools as part of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, secondary schools have been able to offer them. They are accredited by SCOTVEC.
P4, P7	These are designations of year groups in primary schools. P1 is the first year of primary schooling, P4 the fourth and P7 the seventh and normally the last year before a pupil transfers to secondary education.
Region	The name given to the main geographic administrative areas in Scotland. Currently, in 1995, there are twelve, each with its own Education Authority.
S4	This is one of the secondary school year group designations. S1 is the first year of secondary schooling, S2 the second and so on. S4 is therefore the fourth year of secondary school. In Scotland pupils transfer from primary school into S1 about the age of twelve. Compulsory schooling ends around the age of sixteen, and the main points at which pupils may leave school are the end of S4 and Christmas in S5. Pupils may stay on beyond that point, to take Higher Grade and other courses, not normally continuing beyond S6.
SCAMP	Schools Computer Administration and Management Program.
SCOTVEC	Scottish Vocational Education Council.
SCRE	Scottish Council for Research in Education.
SEB	Scottish Examination Board. Administering body for Standard Grade and SEB short courses.

SOED	Scottish Office Education Department (now Scottish Office Education and Industry Department).
Standard Grade	Standard Grade certification, which replaced 'O' Grade certification in 1986, applies to two-year courses designed to be taken by secondary school pupils in the final years of compulsory education. Standard Grade assessment is divided into three different levels of attainment, from a basic level of Foundation (Grades 5 and 6) rising through General (Grades 3 and 4) and Credit (Grades 1 and 2). There is also an award at Grade 7 which means that a pupil has completed the course. Standard Grades are administered by the SEB.

Summary of findings

This research was commissioned by the Scottish Office Education Department and carried out between April and December 1994. The three main aims were to explore the statistical relationship between attendance, truancy and pupil performance in examinations, to find out what impact truant behaviour can have (not only on truants but also on 'good attenders', teachers and teaching) and to uncover some of the factors which influence pupils to play truant.

The study involved a sample of seven secondary schools and seven associated primary schools in two local authorities. Information was gathered from teachers, pupils and parents as well as from records for school attendance and Standard Grade examination results. Although the sample is small, the schools were chosen with care to ensure that none was atypical and that the sample included denominational and non-denominational schools, schools of varying sizes and schools with a range of settings and socio-economic backgrounds. While the findings are not strictly generalisable, this careful selection makes it reasonable to suppose that many will apply in other schools.

The report makes use of two terms which require some explanation. 'Explained absence' refers to authorised absences with the exclusion of regular school activities such as work experience and study leave. The term 'unexplained absence' is virtually identical to unauthorised absence.

■ Main findings

- In every school but one, pupil absences were more likely to be 'explained' than 'unexplained'. During the first two terms of 1993/94 at least 89% of pupils in each school registered some explained absence. In the same period between 14% and 89% registered some unexplained absence. Two schools registered unexplained absence above 85%, one at 14% and the remaining four between 40% and 70%.

- Unexplained absence rates were similar for boys and girls but explained absence rates were slightly higher for girls than for boys.

Attendance and performance

- In most of the secondary schools, rates of 'explained absence' in S4 were greater than rates of unexplained absence.

- Both primary and secondary teachers thought that if pupils missed school, the quality of their school work would drop. However, they believed that pupils' school performance was also affected by personal and social factors. In general good attenders reported that they were not much affected when truants missed school, but a minority said it did have an effect on them.

- Statistical analysis of school attendance records for S4 and Standard Grade results showed that as the level of absence increased, the level of Standard Grade award decreased. This was true for both maths and English language, and almost equally for boys and girls. However, there was considerable variation among schools and the findings of this research cannot take into account factors other than absence which may affect attainment.

- Explained absence is comparable in its effects on attainment with unexplained absence.

- Secondary school teachers generally agreed that truants did not realise what the effects of truancy were likely to be. However, S4 truants did acknowledge that they could fall behind and get poorer marks, and most of them were uneasy about this.

Reasons why pupils miss school

- Primary teachers said they had little experience of truancy but believed that when pupils truanted it was usually because their parents kept them away.

- Primary pupils thought it was understandable to stay away from school if they were bored and disliked school subjects, or if they were asked to help at home. However, nearly all the primary pupils also said their parents would not approve if they skipped school.

- Secondary teachers also thought that some parents kept children off school to help with home-related tasks such as shopping. However, most often secondary teachers believed truants missed school to avoid subjects they disliked or found difficult.

- Truants in secondary schools said they truanted because they were bored with school, and would rather be earning money at work. Some of the 'good attenders' said that if subjects were more interesting and more choice was available they thought the truanting pupils would be more likely to attend.

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings from a nine-month research project funded by the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED) between April 1994 and December 1995. It was carried out by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE).

As the project's title, 'Links Between Attendance, Truancy and Performance' suggests, a major aim was to explore the nature of links between pupils' attendance and their performance in school examinations. Examination performance is just one element of school experience which might be affected by a pupil's absence, so the project also aimed to find out if poor attendance had other effects, whether these were on the pupils who played truant, their classmates, their teachers or the school as a whole. Specifically, the research questions addressed were:

- what statistical relationship is there between attendance, truancy and pupil performance?
- what is the impact of truant behaviour on those pupils who are not truants, on teachers and on teaching?
- what factors influence pupils to play truant?

Sample and research method

The study involved staff, pupils and parents in schools in two local authority areas. With the permission and assistance of the two local authorities concerned, seven pairs of schools, each pair made up of a secondary school plus one of its associated primaries, were approached and agreed to take part. The schools were carefully chosen from a list offered by the local authorities to include a range of sizes in both secondary and primary schools, as well as a range of locations which included city-centre and urban, denominational and non-denominational schools, and schools sited in areas with different socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, great care was taken to ensure that none of the schools was outstandingly different for any reason. Thus, while a sample of seven secondary and seven primary schools cannot be representative of schools as a whole, as far as possible within the resources at our disposal we strove to ensure that the data gathered from this sample would be worthwhile.

In primary schools, those involved were pupils and teachers of P4 and P7 classes. In the secondary schools the focus was on the S4 year group, for two reasons: previous research (Scottish Office, 1991a) has shown that levels of truancy are at their highest in S4, and it is in S4 that pupils take their Standard Grade examinations.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. The quantitative element was essential to the project as it would provide not only a detailed record of S4 pupil attendance in the seven secondary schools, but also give reliable measures of performance, ie Standard Grade results, which could be set alongside the attendance data. The seven secondary schools provided attendance records for pupils in the whole of the S4 year (1,250 pupils in total), while the participating Regions supplied us with individual Standard Grade results for mathematics and English.

We also gathered information on the SCOTVEC National Certificate and SEB short course results obtained by the S4 pupils, with the intention of creating a broader measure of performance than that provided by Standard Grade alone. In particular, we sought a measure which would better quantify the performance of poor attainers. We discovered, however, that this would be difficult to do with the resources at our disposal, as the data were too disparate to lend themselves easily to analysis. For example, in one school all pupils took one module, while in another only one pupil took any. Consequently, the measure of performance used in this study is based solely on Standard Grade awards.

A second intention that also proved beyond reach was to look at the influence of concealed truancy (absence from single lessons not recorded on the school register) on Standard Grade results in art, French and geography. The difficulty encountered here was of obtaining compatible measures of absence from the class teachers of these subjects as they had to rely largely on memory to do this.

The quantitative data were complemented by qualitative information from both interviews and questionnaires. In all schools we interviewed the head teachers (7 primary, 7 secondary). In addition, in primary schools P4 and P7 teachers were interviewed (14 teachers in all), and in secondary schools, one teacher of guidance and three subject teachers which in each school always included mathematics. The two others were drawn from French, art and design and geography (7 guidance teachers and 21 subject teachers in total). However, we considered it particularly important to go beyond these adult perceptions to find out what views pupils themselves held. We therefore devised and piloted instruments appropriate for use with P4 and P7 children to obtain their written views about truancy; the researchers administered these in each primary school with one P4 and one P7 class, which yielded 145 P4 and 154 P7 responses. In addition, we drew up a brief questionnaire which in each secondary school was given to a small S4 pupil group, brought together with the assistance of school staff. Our aim was that the groups should be composed half of known poor attenders and half of known good or average attenders. Because approximately half the truant pupils failed either to appear when the questionnaires were administered or to respond to attempts to chase them up afterwards, in all 25 truant and 51 non-truant questionnaires were completed. Where the pupils were willing, we followed up some of the more interesting truant responses by talking to the pupils themselves (8 interviews). Finally, we conducted brief telephone interviews with a small number of parents of both primary and secondary pupils. Those interested to have more information about either the research methods used or the specific questions asked should refer to the Technical Appendix, which gives greater detail than has been given here and contains copies of the instruments used.

■ Note on terms used

'Acceptable' and 'unacceptable' absence

At various points in the report we have found it necessary to use different terms in our discussion of attendance and absence. One reason for this is that at the time data were gathered (the autumn term, 1994) schools were keeping records of attendance under the two categories authorised and unauthorised, fulfilling the requirements of *Circular 10/93*. However, the circular left detailed interpretation of these categories to individual education authorities, amongst which there were some differences of view. For example, should family holidays count as authorised or unauthorised absence? When pupils were out of school on work experience, was this authorised absence or attendance? In June 1994 the SOED issued *Circular 8/94* which gave guidance on questions such as these. However, although the circular came into effect from August 1994, schools were not required to follow its guidance in recording levels of attendance and absence until January 1995 (in fact *Circular 8/94* was later superseded by *Circular 1/95*). Because variations in Authorities' use of the terms 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' were still, therefore, possible, in the interviews with staff we adopted the terms 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' absence, having first clarified what staff understood by them. The interpretations staff put on these types of absences are reported in Chapter Two.

'Explained' and 'unexplained' absence

Another pair of terms, 'explained' and 'unexplained' absence, has been adopted in discussing the statistical data. We found that if work experience, school field trips, study leave and attendance at college were included in the category of authorised absence, and analyses were run using these categories, the dominant feature of the graphs which showed week by week attendance patterns was the large peaks these produced. It seemed sensible to remove the peaks from subsequent analyses, and for this purpose we created new categories of 'explained' and 'unexplained' absence. Explained absence sought to capture absence that was not part of a regular school activity but for which some explanation was nevertheless given. Illness is an example. For a full listing of the types of absence included in the 'explained' and 'unexplained' categories, see the Technical Appendix.

■ Organisation of the report

As the paragraphs above will have made clear, the project drew on numerous different data strands. Throughout the report, we have tried to present these coherently by organising them into clear themes and by presenting for each theme first the primary school data, then those from secondary schools. In this way we hope that any progression in the extent of truancy or the motives underpinning it as pupils progress from stage to stage will be seen more clearly.

The report is divided into five chapters, of which this is the first. **Chapter Two**, 'The Nature and Extent of Absence' starts with a brief examination of what kind of absence teachers feel is acceptable and what kind they feel is unacceptable, and points to differences in the ways that primary and secondary school staff had experience of truancy. This background discussion is followed by primary staff perceptions of the extent of truancy in their schools, while in turn the staff insights are followed with information gathered from primary pupils on the extent to which they have felt tempted to miss school. Discussion then moves to the secondary sector. The results of analyses carried out on the SCAMP (Schools Computer Administration and Management Program) attendance records from the seven secondary schools are presented. They are complemented by staff comments on the levels of acceptable and unacceptable absence they have experienced, and on the system through which the SCAMP data were gathered.

Chapter Three, 'The Importance of Attendance', focuses first on the views held by primary teachers of the value of regular attendance at school, and on the effects which they perceived to result when attendance was interrupted. After this the report moves to the secondary sector as we present analyses of the Standard Grade awards gained by truant and non-truant S4 groups. A discussion of what these statistical analyses of the links between attendance and performance reveal is followed by staff and pupil views of the effects, other than on academic performance, that truancy can have.

In **Chapter Four**, 'Why Pupils Miss School', we concentrate on information gathered for this project from staff and pupils which helps us understand why young people, first at primary level then at secondary, want to miss school. The chapter ends by offering some insight, though limited, into parents' thinking on truancy.

Chapter 5, 'Summary', highlights the main findings from the report.

2 The nature and extent of absence

Fieldwork for this project began in August 1994 and was complete by December of that year. During that period, schools followed the guidance given in *Circular 10/93* for recording attendance. This required them to record absence as authorised or unauthorised according to criteria contained in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, but the matter of judging whether an absence was authorised or unauthorised was left largely to the discretion of education authorities.

We were naturally aware of debate amongst the education authorities on this issue and were not sure how far there was agreement about interpretation of these terms among the school staff to whom we would speak. Our initial research had also made us aware that some staff preferred to avoid the word 'truancy' with its pejorative undertones. For these reasons we felt a need to tread carefully when asking school staff for their views about truancy, and thought it best to begin all interviews by probing for what interviewees saw as 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' reasons for absence. Only then, when we could be sure we shared the same understanding, could we be confident that questions to individual school staff about the extent of truancy they personally had encountered would be consistently meaningful. For further explanation of these terms as well as of 'explained/unexplained' and 'authorised/unauthorised' absence, to which this chapter also refers, readers are directed to the note on terms used, p.2.

In this chapter we provide data which help to further understanding of the nature and extent of school absence in P4, P7 and S4 pupils. We look first at the information from primary schools, which come from interviews alone, and then at the data from secondary schools, which come from both interviews and records of attendance.

■ Information from primary schools

What kinds of absences were unacceptable to staff?

Asked this question, the seven primary school headteachers interviewed offered a number of types of absences, which we have drawn together into five groups as follows:

- absences which made life more convenient for parents, such as going shopping
- absences arising from a generally chaotic family life
- trivial reasons such as very minor illnesses
- Friday afternoon absences
- truancy, without parental knowledge.

P4 and P7 teachers were concerned about bogus 'authorisation' which for some reason aroused their suspicion as signalling absences which they would find unacceptable, such as notes written for short, frequent absences. Other circumstances cited as likely to fuel suspicion included brothers and sisters being away together and claims for the kinds of illnesses which were hard to disprove, such as colds which cleared up quickly.

How extensive were such absences?

Primary headteachers were asked how many instances of absences of these kinds they had encountered in school that year, in any year groups. Three of the seven replied that numbers were very small, but the other four suggested that greater numbers of pupils than this had a record of unacceptable absences in their schools.

Asked further if they could see any patterns in the absences, a number of headteachers noted that if the school was closed on Friday afternoons, children were likely to be absent for the morning as well. Some headteachers commented that Mondays were particularly vulnerable to absence, and, in keeping with their earlier comments, others remarked that children's absences sometimes reflected their parents' life styles. Interestingly, some of the headteachers told us that the pupils they had in mind had 'track records' of absence and that they felt these absences were likely to continue.

Classroom teachers were also asked how much unacceptable absence they had encountered, but with respect only to the classes they taught that year. Their responses suggest that unacceptable absences were rare, though perhaps slightly less so in P7 than P4: six P7 teachers could bring to mind pupils with absences of this kind, compared to only three P4 teachers.

Information collected from P4 and P7 pupils, however, leads us to wonder whether primary school staff are necessarily aware of all the pupil absences of which they might not approve. In each of the seven primary schools we visited, we gathered material from an entire P4 and an entire P7 class: 145 P4 and 154 P7 pupils in total. Having read the pupils a story about a child pretending to be ill to avoid going to school, the researchers asked the children to complete a simple questionnaire asking them first if they had ever pretended to be ill like the child in the story, and then if they had succeeded.

- 19% in P4 claimed to have pretended to be ill; 8% claimed to have succeeded
- 34% in P7 claimed to have pretended and 15% that they had succeeded.

Asked in an open question what strategies other than pretending to be ill there might be for getting out of going to school, pupils offered several. Setting aside the wildest of these, we were left with a range of possibilities which were classified as follows (the numbers are the number of times a comment of this type was made):

	Numbers of comments	
	P4	**P7**
Deceiving mother, including pretending to go to school but going elsewhere	17	21
Sleeping in	11	—
Pretending to have a dentist's appointment	—	4
Pretending to parents that there was a school holiday	2	8
Pretending to be bullied	1	5

We followed this question with another which asked the children if they had ever tried any of these strategies. Thirty-seven P4 and 37 P7 pupils claimed they had, but unfortunately we do not know how many of these attempts had 'worked'.

We had also asked pupils a different question: 'If you took a day off school and nobody caught you, what would you do?' which led the children to cite a number of possible activities (these are listed on page 35). This question was followed by another which asked the pupils if, in fact, they had ever done these things (in the context of having taken a day off school). Pupils replied as follows:

	P4 n=145 **(%)**	**P7 n=154** **(%)**
• no	53	69
• yes, once	15	18
• yes, more than once	12	7
• no response	20	6

If the pupils were responding seriously and truthfully, about a quarter in each year group had taken time off school without being caught out at some time since they began their school careers. The fact that they claimed to have done this without being found out goes some way towards explaining the apparent mismatch between these figures and the belief that truancy is rare in primary schools. In addition, it is important to remember that staff were thinking of the incidence of truancy at any one time, while the pupils had been asked if they had 'ever' played truant in this way, so the pupil figures represent truancy over the course of their school lives. Fifteen percent of the P4 pupils, for example, said they had taken one day off at some time, but that could have been any school day from their first attendance in P1 up to the day of the research. It is also worth noting that the questions focused on missing school for a day only, so any truancies the pupils were admitting to here were relatively short. We should also bear in mind the possibility that some children might have replied creatively to the questions, including this one, although the researchers who obtained the responses, talking the children through the 'questionnaire' question by question, were convinced the pupils took them seriously and gave as honest an account as they could.

According to teachers, then, the picture of the extent of 'unacceptable' absence in primary school was that it is relatively rare. If pupil self-reporting is taken into account, however, truancy levels at primary schools may be higher than staff believed.

■ Information from secondary schools

In gathering information about the extent of 'unacceptable' absence for the primary sector we asked for staff and pupil views. For the secondary school phase of the study, however, we were also able to access a different kind of information: namely, the attendance records kept by schools on a day-to-day basis. In both the authorities involved in the study we were fortunate that schools used the 'SCAMP' database to keep these records. This made both access and analysis much easier, although, as opinion reported later in this section indicates, it would be difficult for the SCAMP records to present a totally unambiguous picture of attendance and absence. They do, however, represent an important data set and are the most accurate records of pupil attendance in schools to date. The SCAMP information available to us consisted of attendance records for the entire year in which the 1993/94 S4 year group was in school.

Rates of explained and unexplained absence

The recent report on attendance and absence produced by HM Inspectors of Schools Audit Unit (SOED, 1995) gives authorised absence rates in S4 as 12% and unauthorised as 2%. Using definitions that differ from those used by the Audit Unit (see the note on terms used, p.2, and the Technical Appendix) and covering just the first two terms of the school year and not the whole, we found that for the schools in the sample there were explained absence rates of 8.3% and unexplained rates of 4.7%.

That explained absence is lower than authorised is partly caused by the different definitions, our having counted as 'attending school' some of the pupils whom the Audit Unit counted as being 'authorised absentees'. If, as may be the case, absence is higher in the third school term, the fact that we did not collect for the third term in the sample schools may also have contributed to the difference. The Audit Unit figures are based on the full year's records. That said, the higher figure for unexplained absence, which is equivalent to the Audit Unit's 'unauthorised absence' would seem to suggest higher rates of such absence in the sample schools than hold nationally.

The two tables that follow break down the gross figures for the individual sample schools by pupil gender, and give figures for the first two terms of 1993/94 separately. Rates are total pupil-time (pupil-hours) spent in absence expressed as a percentage of the total pupil-time available in the two terms.

Table 1: Rates of explained absence in the 7 sample schools for Terms 1 and 2

	Term 1			Term 2		
	All (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	All (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Overall	8.3	7.2	9.3	8.2	7.2	9.1
School 1	12.8	12.5	13.1	12.1	12.7	11.7
School 2	7.1	6.4	8.2	6.3	5.9	6.9
School 3	10.3	8.6	11.5	13.5	13.0	13.8
School 4	5.1	5.3	4.9	6.2	4.9	7.5
School 5	5.6	4.1	6.8	6.0	4.9	6.9
School 6	9.1	7.4	10.8	7.9	5.7	10.0
School 7	9.5	8.1	10.7	8.3	8.3	8.3

Table 2: Rates of unexplained absence in the 7 sample schools for Terms 1 and 2

	Term 1			Term 2		
	All (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	All (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Overall	4.2	4.5	3.8	5.4	5.5	5.3
School 1	1.6	2.7	0.7	2.0	2.8	1.4
School 2	8.0	7.9	8.3	9.0	8.0	10.4
School 3	2.3	2.2	2.3	3.2	2.3	3.9
School 4	3.2	3.4	3.1	3.2	4.9	1.5
School 5	2.2	1.0	3.1	2.4	1.3	3.1
School 6	8.0	9.1	7.0	11.8	12.1	11.6
School 7	0.7	0.6	0.8	1.9	2.0	1.9

There is wide variation between schools in both explained absence and unexplained. Explained absence ranges from 5.1% at its lowest to 13.5% at its highest, and unexplained absence, though lower in absolute value, shows an even greater relative range from 0.7% to 11.8%. Mean values are, of course, averages over all pupils and thus some pupils will individually have higher absence rates than the mean. As will be seen from later tables, schools with higher mean absence rates also have more pupils with high personal rates of absence.

Explained absence is in general higher for girls than for boys but unexplained absence is similar for both. There are exceptions to these general rules, few in the case of explained absence but more for unexplained. Boys in School 1 stand out as having approximately double the unexplained absence rate of girls, while the reverse holds for School 5. School 4 shows an irregular pattern. In the first term the rates of both explained absence and unexplained absence are almost equal for boys and girls, but this is not so in the second term. In this term, total absence is the same for boys and girls, but its division between explained and unexplained absence differs markedly. What the cause of these differences can be is not immediately apparent. One must presume from their irregularity that they must depend on factors particular to the individual schools.

Explained absence rates are very similar in the two terms. School 3 shows the largest increase, from 10.3% in the first term to 13.5% in the second, but this is exceptionally high. A few schools show the reverse trend.

Unexplained absence tends to increase in the second term, but not greatly. School 7 shows the greatest relative increase, with the rate more than doubling, but starting from a very low base. School 6 shows the largest absolute increase, from 8.0% to 11.8%, much bigger than for any other school.

The detailed pattern of week-on-week figures that underlies the aggregate values just given is obviously of interest and ideally should be shown for each school, but this would take too much space. Consequently we restrict ourselves to giving this level of detail for just one school, School 4. This school has been chosen as being the closest to the average from those we have and the graphs for it do show the main features common to all the other schools.

Rates of authorised and unauthorised absence for the school year 1993/94

The graphs that follow on pages 10 and 11show authorised and unauthorised absence throughout the school year for boys and for girls in School 4. (The full set is given in the Technical Appendix.) For these graphs, we revert to 'authorised absence' instead of 'explained absence', which is used elsewhere in this report, because one reason for presenting the graphs is to demonstrate why the change was made from the first to the second measure for the analytical part of this report. (Note that, as is pointed out in the Technical Appendix, despite being named differently, unauthorised and unexplained absence are virtually identical measures.)

The most striking feature of the two graphs is the large peaks of authorised absence. These are explained by various legitimate out-of-school activities: work experience, courses at local colleges, and work study are the most common. As the graphs show very clearly, release for these activities involves either all pupils or a half of them at any one time. The change from authorised to explained absence was made largely to remove these prominent peaks of legitimate activity from the data used in subsequent analyses. Firstly, to count them as absence, in the sense that absence is thought of in this report, is questionable. Secondly, their exceptional character, clearly setting them apart from normal, day-to-day absence, calls for their removal from analyses of the connection between absence and attainment, if these are to be understood readily.

A second feature that influenced how we chose to pursue the analysis is evident from the graphs. This is the picture for the third term, weeks 35 to 45. While not uniform across all schools, there was a general pattern of high and erratic absence during this period. In spite of the high probability of truancy at this time of year, the many other reasons for pupil

Figure 1: Weekly variation in authorised and unauthorised absences shown by boys in School 4

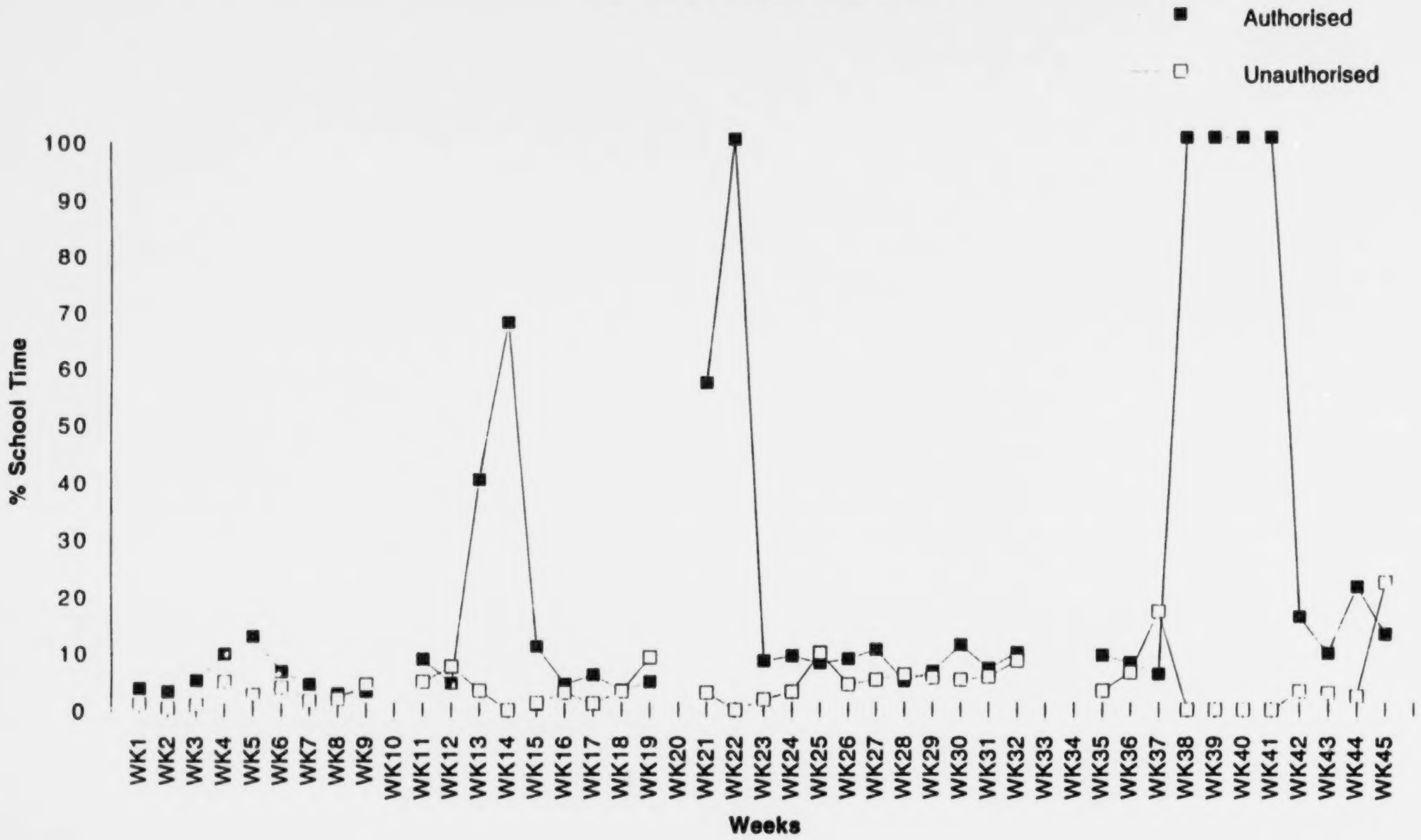
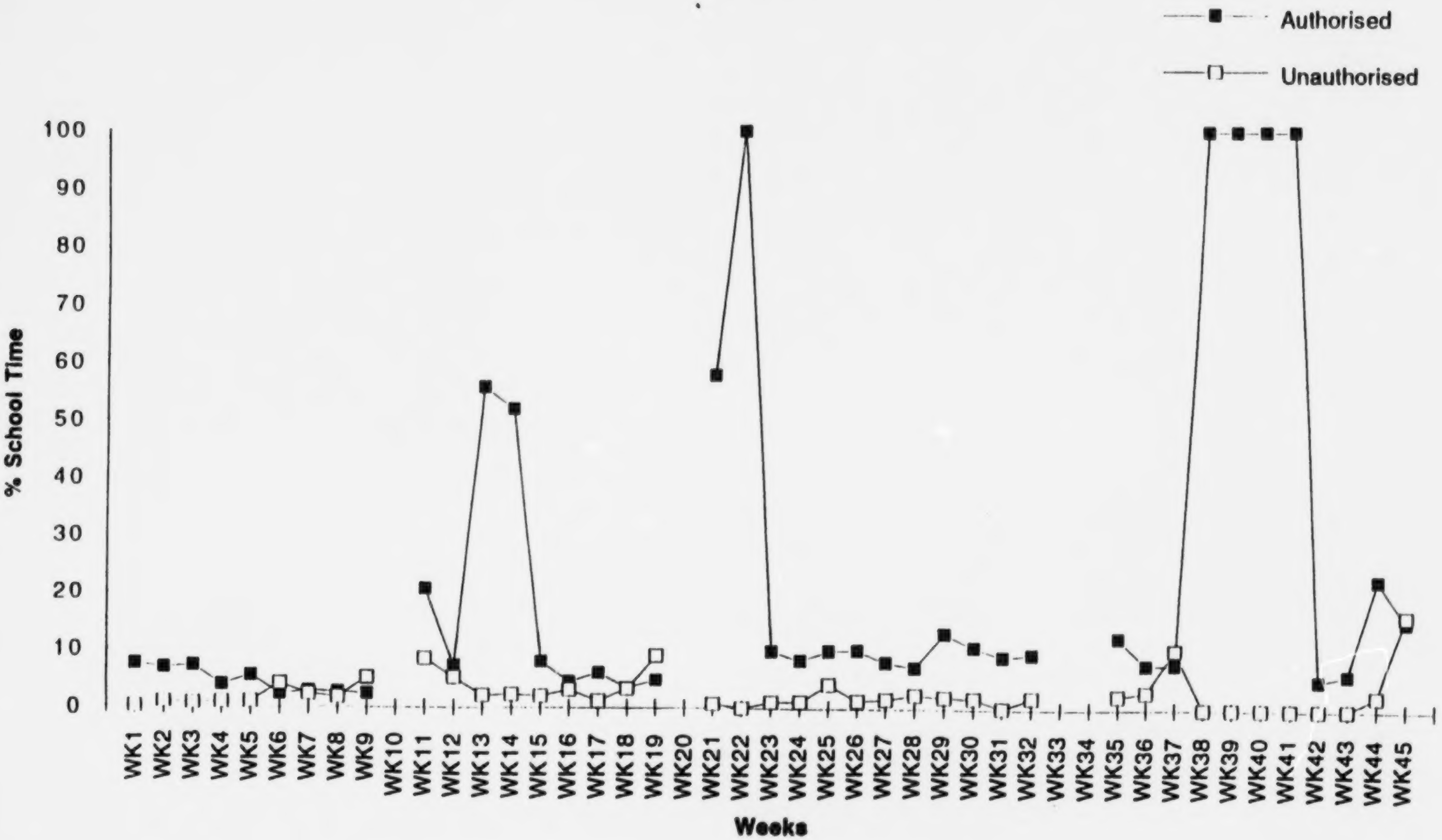


Figure 2: Weekly variation in authorised and unauthorised absences shown by girls in School 4



absence made it difficult to track pupil attendance patterns at this time. It was therefore decided to use absence over two terms as the measure of a pupil's attendance, not that over the full three terms.

Other features of the graphs are less striking. The patterns do not differ greatly between boys and girls. There is little evidence to support any belief in a large, steady rise in absence as the school year progresses. Outwith the peaks referred to, authorised absence is about double unauthorised absence.

An interesting point, though incidental to our analysis, is that the graphs show higher absence on either side of holidays (holidays are marked by blank spaces on the graphs). And a point that might not otherwise have been appreciated is that pupils cannot be recorded as 'absent without authorisation' while away on activities such as study leave. Firstly the school would not know of such absences, and secondly the register allows only one entry against each time slot.

The spread of absence in schools

The final pair of tables in this chapter presents data on the spread of absence found in the schools, supplementing the average values given in Tables 1 and 2. Entries are against percentage of pupil-time. The time period considered is also, as before, the first two terms of the year: the autumn and the spring terms, but in this case added together and not presented individually. Only those pupils present in both terms are counted in these tables.

In each of the tables the first column gives the percentage of pupils who were not absent at all in this period. The other columns show the range of absence that was found by giving the levels reached by the least absent 10% of pupils, the least absent 25% and so on up to the least absent 90%. Table 3 shows the spread of *explained* absence and Table 4 that of *unexplained.*

Table 3: The spread of explained absence in the seven sample schools

	Percent of pupils with no explained absence	Upper limit of explained absence rates per individual for the least absent pupils				
		10% of pupils	25% of pupils	50% of pupils	75% of pupils	90% of pupils
Overall	6.7	0.8	2.3	5.6	11.6	19.2
School 1	1.1	2.3	4.7	9.1	16.6	26.5
School 2	7.6	0.4	1.6	4.8	9.0	17.2
School 3	5.7	0.8	3.6	7.6	17.7	26.0
School 4	10.7	0.0	0.8	3.2	7.2	12.6
School 5	7.4	0.8	1.5	3.8	7.9	13.5
School 6	7.3	0.5	2.8	6.4	12.8	18.1
School 7	7.9	0.4	2.7	6.4	12.1	21.0

Table 4: The spread of unexplained absence in the seven sample schools

	Percent of pupils with no unexplained absence	Upper limit of unexplained absence rate for the least absent pupils				
		10% of pupils	25% of pupils	50% of pupils	75% of pupils	90% of pupils
Overall	40.4	0.0	0.0	0.8	3.7	12.3
School 1	61.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	4.6
School 2	14.6	0.0	0.8	2.6	7.8	20.3
School 3	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.8	3.2	7.3
School 4	31.1	0.0	0.0	1.2	4.0	8.5
School 5	59.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	4.4
School 6	10.9	0.0	0.8	4.0	12.3	24.8
School 7	86.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8

To help with the interpretation of these tables, take the line for School 1 in Table 3 as an example. The figure of 1.1% for the proportion of pupils with no explained absences in the two terms is simply that: 1.1% of all the pupils in School 1 were not absent with explanation at all during this period. They may have been away from school without explanation or they may have been present the full time, but they had no *explained* absence. Note also that this figure has a certain relativity: it depends on how long a time period is considered: taken over a week, a much higher proportion of pupils would fall into this category but over four years the percentage would be much lower.

Still reading the line for School 1, consider next the set of five figures that show the rate for explained absence for various groups of pupils. The first of these, 2.3%, shows that 10% of the pupils were absent with explanation for up to, but no more than, 2.3% of the first two terms. The next figure, 4.7%, shows that 25% of pupils were absent for up to, but no more than, 4.7% of the time. 4.7%, then, is the 'lower quartile' absence rate for School 1. The middle figure shows that half the pupils were off for less than 9.1% of the time and a half for more than this: so that 9.1% is the 'median' absence rate for School 1. Similarly, 16.6% is the 'upper quartile' absence rate. Last, the final figure shows that 90% of pupils missed less than 26.5% of the time, thus the remaining 10% of pupils were off for at least 26.5% of the two terms.

Some caution, however, is required with interpreting this last figure. A number of those pupils who were registered for only part of either term are likely to be in this group as absence rate is calculated only on potential attendance at school, not on the full time available in the two terms. A pupil who was only registered at school for four days in these two terms and who was absent for one of these would, consequently, show a 25% absence rate.

The most striking feature of these tables is the great variation between schools in explained, but even more in unexplained absence. School 2 had as few as 14.6% of pupils without unexplained absence whereas School 7 had 86%. This is an extremely large difference.

The second feature is one that has been remarked on several times already: explained absence is greater than unexplained. Half the pupils were off with explanation for about 5% of the two terms, but only 1% without explanation.

Finally, the extremes of absence shown in the tables must be considered. The figures at the lower end of the table for explained absence must, in general, be welcome. In all schools at least a quarter of the pupils were either not off school at all without explanation, or were off for extremely short periods, and in most schools this was the case for at least half of the pupils. In most schools it would appear that between a half and two-thirds of pupils were absent without explanation for fewer than five days over the two terms (3% of the time).

On the other hand, the figures for the most absent pupils must cause concern. Consider the figures under the right-most column of each table, those labelled '90% of pupils'. These indicate the minimum rate of absence for the 10% of pupils in each school with the most explained absence and for the 10% with the most unexplained absence. Even allowing for the proviso made above regarding pupils who were registered for only part of the two terms, the figures, generally, are high. Consider first those for explained absence. In most schools (all but two) 10% of pupils were away from school, albeit with an explanation, for about a fifth of the time, at least, that they should have been in attendance. In the other two schools at least 12% of the time was lost this way to the top 10% of absentees. Turn next to the same column on the table for unexplained absence. Although the rates generally are not as high as for explained absence, in two schools the rates reach similar levels. In these two schools, 10% of pupils were absent without explanation for between a fifth and a quarter of the two terms we studied. In three of the seven schools, the most absent pupils were absent for about 10% of the time, in two schools they were absent for about 5% of the time, and in one school they were absent for 2% of the time.

In summary, in most schools an appreciable number of pupils had high levels of *explained* absence, and while in general far fewer pupils had such extreme rates of *unexplained* absence this was not so in two schools. An appreciable number of the pupils in these two schools had equally high rates of unexplained absence.

Staff views of the nature of absences

Asked what kinds of absences they considered acceptable, all the headteachers interviewed cited genuine illness, family crises and family holidays, work experience and school trips or outings. They all felt that such an interpretation was in line with SOED thinking as contained in the recent *Circular 8/94*. It is therefore reasonable to state that they were in broad agreement about what constituted authorised absence and therefore, if work experience and school outings are counted as genuine school time, that their perceptions of acceptable absence are broadly in line with our definition of explained absence.

All the headteachers were also in agreement that the most important and unacceptable kind of absence was a clear decision on a pupil's part not to come to school: truancy. Interestingly, however, three headteachers also indicated that they personally thought it unacceptable that appointments with the doctor and dentist should keep pupils out of school, as they could with relative ease be made outside school time; in this they felt at odds with SOED guidance which is clear that such appointments constitute authorised and therefore officially acceptable absence. There is, however, no evidence that in feeling this they recorded absence for such reasons as unauthorised. Comments also echoed the primary school perspective that parents play a part in pupil absences: it was unacceptable for pupils to miss school because their parents had not got up in time to get them ready, and it was unacceptable for parents to keep their children away from school so that they could be taken shopping. Such activities, when offered as explanations for absence, would fall into the category of 'unreasonable excuse'.

Teaching staff views tended to reflect those of the headteachers. All the guidance teachers interviewed cited pupil decisions not to come to school as the most important unacceptable kind of absence. In addition, some commented on repetitive and petty excuses and another on 'sleeping in'. Similar types of absences featured in the responses of the subject teachers interviewed, always with decisions not to come to school being central. Several subject teachers pointed out that appointments with doctors and dentists could be made out of school time and from an educational point of view were unacceptable.

School record keeping systems

We asked the secondary school headteachers to describe the procedures involved in keeping records of attendance in their schools, and how satisfied they were with these systems. On the whole, headteachers felt their systems for recording attendance were satisfactory, although some made the point that trying to maintain accurate and updated records was time-consuming and involved staff in much work which at times was wasted, as staff did not always remember or have time to update the records.

There were naturally slight variations in recording procedures amongst the schools, but typically the system involved taking the register at the start of the school day and again after lunch. In addition some schools had established a system through which attendance was checked during each period.

Although one subject teacher felt strongly that the system in her school should be more systematic, staff in secondary schools were generally satisfied with the effectiveness of their recording systems. It is important to note, however, that there was consensus both that recording systems required teachers accurately to record and submit details of attendance, and that any system of recording was only as good as the people who worked with it. There was also concern for the way in which latecoming was recorded, which differed from school to school. Some teachers felt the matter was important because latecoming could be as disruptive as truancy.

Furthermore, the weight placed on SCAMP records may also need to take into account their inability to show condoned truancy, or truancy known to or even connived at by parents. Both Pack (SED 1977) and Munn and Johnstone (SCRE 1992) stressed the difficulties for schools in absences of this kind. Staff might suspect the validity of an explanation for absence, but in practice there is little they can do to question it. This kind of truancy would therefore appear as authorised absence, and be contained within the 'explained absence' category used for the main statistical analyses in this report.

■ Points from Chapter Two

Primary school

Primary school staff claimed little experience of truancy. When truancy did occur, teachers thought it was usually because parents kept children away from school. However, pupils' own reports suggest they skipped school more often than their teachers realised.

Secondary school

S4 records of attendance showed that explained absence rates were higher than unexplained absence rates in most of the secondary schools. However, there were wide variations within this overall pattern.

Ranges and variations

Average *explained* absence rates ranged from 5.1% in School 4 to 13.5% in School 3, and average *unexplained* absence rates ranged from 1% in School 7 to 12% in School 6. In general, *explained* absence rates were higher for girls than for boys. However, *unexplained* absence rates were similar for both boys and girls. In general, *explained* absence rates were similar in terms 1 and 2 but *unexplained* absence rates were slightly higher in term 2. At the level of individual schools differences from these general patterns emerge.

Recording systems

In general, secondary school headteachers felt their schools' systems for recording attendance were satisfactory, but some secondary staff thought that SCAMP records might not always be accurate. Time was not always available for the amount of work needed to update the records. The records could not show instances of condoned truancy.

3 The importance of attendance

The idea that truancy is linked with low academic achievement was addressed by Raffe *et al* (Scottish Office, 1991a) who identified a 'strong association' between high truancy levels and poor academic results. However, Raffe and his team were careful to point out that low academic achievement could just as well cause truancy as be one of its effects. Much of this chapter explores the extent to which, and the way in which, non-attendance and performance are related. The primary school data we have gathered on this issue come from interviews with headteachers and class teachers, and are essentially the opinions of those interviewed. In the secondary sector such information is complemented by analyses of the Standard Grade awards gained by the S4 year group whose attendance patterns have been shown in chapter two. In addition this chapter presents evidence for the effects of truancy, on pupil performance and also on other areas of school life, with the aim of broadening the question of effects to include effects on staff and the school in general. We begin with the primary schools.

Information from primary schools

The effects of truancy on truant pupils

Primary school staff found it hard to respond to the question of what were the main effects of absence on truant pupils, and stressed that truancy in their schools was so rare that they had little experience on which to base their replies. In the primary sector interviews, discussion of the effects of truancy became in practice a discussion of the effects of frequent absence for whatever reason.

That said, the most common view of the effects of absence was that learning was impaired. This was particularly important for 'sequential' subjects like mathematics. The situation, however, was not necessarily hopeless: one P4 teacher thought that a good learning support teacher could make up for the loss of time, and a P7 teacher said that with a little effort a pupil could usually catch up fast. One headteacher thought that while there might be some adverse effect on a child's learning, it was slight in comparison with the effect that absence was likely to have on a child's social and life skills.

Other effects of frequent or regular absence which staff felt were likely included:

- the child's understanding of responsibility, discipline and socialisation would be undermined
- future attendance patterns could be affected
- behavioural problems could result
- there was a danger of the child's getting into poor company.

We had wondered if there was a point at which teachers would begin to be particularly concerned about a child's absence. For some teachers that period began after 'two days or so', and for others, after a week. However, one P7 teacher remarked that occasional absences taken over a long period would cause her more worry than a short block of time missed, because it was harder to help pupils catch up on work. And more important than length of time off school was whether the absences revealed a pattern. In addition, there were comments that whether an absence would cause concern would also depend on the pupil's ability and motivation.

We have already pointed out that primary staff had little experience of truancy and that many of their comments related to the effects of absence in general. Nevertheless we wondered if they thought there was any difference in the effects of absence on pupils who missed school for 'unacceptable' and 'acceptable' reasons. Opinion on this was almost evenly divided. Those who tended to the view that the effects on deliberate non-attenders were worse offered the following reasons:

- staff could be less understanding towards returned truants
- provision was made for children who had been away with long-term illness, but not for truants
- truant returners did not value education enough to put effort into catching up – in fact, they saw being pushed to catch up as a punishment – whereas children away for other reasons were eager to catch up and often had parents who pushed staff to give them extra work
- children who had been away for acceptable reasons such as genuine illness got the support of the other children, whereas truant children were alienated.

The effects of truancy on staff

Asked whether they personally were affected by truant absence (absence which the discussion had already identified as 'unacceptable'), a small number of headteachers said they had more record keeping and administrative work to do when pupils truanted. Classroom teachers were more affected, however. All the teachers of both primary stages involved in the research told us that when and if they experienced such absence, it caused or would cause problems for them. In particular,

- going over old material for the sake of returners made them feel frustrated
- tailoring work to the needs of returned pupils took up extra time
- class management and routine was disrupted.

The effects of truancy on other pupils

We asked headteachers and class teachers if they thought truancy had any effect on good attenders in the class, and if so, what these were. Several of the headteachers thought truancy affected the rest of the pupils in that

- truants set a bad example, which some pupils might be 'inspired' to follow
- they challenged the school ethos of discipline and responsibility
- the school image in the community could be badly affected
- class work had to be re-scheduled to take account of those who had been away (and those who arrived late).

The views class teachers expressed reveal how difficult they found it both to help the truant returners and to ensure they were fair to the good attenders. Some teachers from each primary stage pointed out that if they were giving extra time to help a truant catch up on missed work, the other pupils in the class, deprived of their help, might not progress as they should. Others stressed that if they went over old work within the group or class for the sake of the truants, the other children became frustrated.

Information from secondary schools

Was the picture of the effects of truancy any different in the secondary sector? As with the question of how extensive absence was, whether authorised or unauthorised, we can turn to statistical analysis to address at least one aspect of this issue: that of the effect of absence on attainment. As was stated in the recent Audit Unit publication *Attendance, Truancy and Performance* (SOED, 1993), 'Common sense suggests that there are links between attendance levels and pupils' attainment.' How far do statistics uphold common sense? And can they tell us anything about the nature of such links as might be found? We turn now to the data gathered for the secondary sector, and begin by examining the findings from analyses of the attendance records set against attainment in Standard Grade.

Attendance and attainment in English and Mathematics

The purpose of this section dealing with the relationship between attendance and attainment is to present the numerical data bearing on the effects of truancy, before the report moves on to a qualitative analysis of staff and pupil views of its broader impact. We therefore begin with simple descriptive statistics from the quantitative data, following these with the results of the regression analyses performed on them.

Tables 5a and 5b show the spread of explained and unexplained absence respectively in term one and term two of S4 for pupils who go on to obtain various levels of Standard Grade in English. Tables 6a and 6b present the same information, but for mathematics. Each table gives aggregate figures over all seven schools, expressed as a percentage of the total school time available to each pupil in the two terms. As explained earlier, activities like work experience are here counted as time at school, not as absence. The Technical Appendix contains a full explanation of the statistical terms and techniques used for these analyses.

The spread of explained and unexplained absence for pupils obtaining various Standard Grade English awards

Table 5a Explained absence rates (% time)

Award	Mean %	Median %	Central 50% of pupils %
Grade 1	3.7	3.0	0.8–5.6
Grade 2	5.8	3.6	1.1–8.1
Grade 3	8.0	6.0	2.8–10.8
Grade 4	10.0	7.5	3.2–13.9
Grade 5	12.2	9.9	3.7–18.0
Grade 6	10.9	8.6	2.1–18.4
Grade 7	–	–	–
no award	13.4	9.9	2.42–20.4

Table 5b Unexplained absence rates (% time)

Award	Mean %	Median %	Central 50% of pupils %
Grade 1	0.5	0.0	0.0–0.4
Grade 2	1.4	0.0	0.0–1.5
Grade 3	2.4	0.7	0.0–2.4
Grade 4	5.0	2.0	0.0–6.3
Grade 5	5.4	1.8	0.0–7.2
Grade 6	9.4	7.2	4.9–14.1
Grade 7	–	–	–
no award	20.6	13.5	2.4–33.2

The spread of explained and unexplained absence for pupils obtaining various Standard Grade mathematics awards

Table 6a: Explained absence rates (% time)				Table 6b: Unexplained absence rates (% time)		
Award %	Mean %	Median %	Central 50% of pupils %	Mean %	Median %	Central 50% of pupils %
Grade 1	3.3	2.0	0.8-5.2	0.6	0.0	0.0-0.4
Grade 2	5.8	4.7	1.9-7.7	1.3	0.2	0.0-0.9
Grade 3	6.6	4.5	2.0-8.3	1.4	0.2	0.0-1.5
Grade 4	8.0	6.8	3.2-11.8	2.6	0.8	0.0-2.8
Grade 5	10.5	8.0	3.2-16.1	5.2	1.9	0.0-5.5
Grade 6	11.4	9.2	3.2-16.0	7.1	3.2	1.2-11.2
Grade 7	13.2	11.6	4.8-16.3	8.0	3.6	0.0-9.2
no award	17.7	14.8	2.6-24.7	19.8	13.4	3.5-30.2

Five features stand out. First, for most of the pupils, explained absence is several times greater than unexplained absence. The exception is the 'no award' pupil group, for whom the reverse is true, the unexplained absence rate for this group showing a large increase over the rates for pupils gaining a grade 6 or grade 7.

Second, absence increases as the level of Standard Grade award decreases. This would be expected but, as will be discussed elsewhere, the data leave unresolved whether a causal link exists between them. The same pattern would be observed whether attainment were totally dependent on attendance or whether, conversely, attendance were totally dependent on attainment.

Third, results for English and mathematics are generally similar. While differences exist, and the reasons can be speculated upon, they are slight and the main pattern is one of similarity.

Fourth, within a grade level the range of absence is large. It is so wide that, for example, 25% of pupils who gained a grade 1 in mathematics had a record of explained absence for more than 5.2% of the two terms, whereas 25% of those getting a grade 7 were absent for less time than this, 4.8%. For unexplained absence this feature is, if anything, more striking. Generally, a quarter of all pupils getting low grades (5, 6 and 7) in mathematics did not miss a single day's schooling through unexplained absence. In this respect they were model pupils. There is a big overlap in absence between pupils gaining different levels of award: absence is not the sole influence on attainment.

The fifth notable feature, that for unexplained absence the median values are in general much lower than the mean values, further emphasises the wide range of absence to be found at each Standard Grade level. There must be a number of pupils at each grade with large unexplained absences to raise the mean so far above the median.

A final point to note, because it will recur later in the regression analyses, is that the mean absence rate increases on average by between 1.1% and 1.9% for each fall of one grade level. This rate of increase is similar for explained absence and for unexplained absence and for English and mathematics.

The next set of tables takes the reverse perspective. Instead of classifying pupils by attainment and examining their absence record, these tables classify pupils by absence and look at their attainment records. For the purposes of this analysis the 1225 pupils in the seven schools were divided into five equal groups of 245 pupils. The first group consisted of the 245 pupils with least absence, the second of those with the 'next-least' absence, and so upwards, with the last group consisting of the 245 pupils with the most absence. Mean Standard Grade awards for each of the groups were calculated and these are shown in the tables. The mean grades were calculated for both English and mathematics Standard Grades. (Pupils who entered but did not gain an award at Standard Grade have been omitted from these calculations, ie 55 pupils who failed to gain an award for English and 33 who failed to gain an award for mathematics. The difficulty in including them is, clearly, what numerical value to allocate a 'no award'.)

Table 7 relates to pupils grouped by their explained absence, Table 8 to those grouped by unexplained absence.

Table 7: Mean awards for various levels of explained absence

	English Standard Grade award	Mathematics Standard Grade award
Group	Mean award	Mean award
All pupils	3.0	3.7
Least absent 20%	2.6	2.9
Next most absent 20%	2.8	3.4
Median 20%	2.9	3.4
Next most absent 20%	3.2	4.1
Most absent 20%	3.6	4.7

Two main points can be noted here. First, the general pattern in English is similar to that in mathematics: the greater the absenteeism, the lower the mean grade. Pupils in the 'most absent' group can expect to gain between one and two grades lower than those in the 'least absent' group. Second, absence would appear to have a greater bearing on attainment in mathematics than English. The fall in mean grade between the least and most absent groups is more marked for this subject.

The next table parallels Table 7 but uses unexplained absence to divide the pupils. It differs from Table 7 in one marked respect as a consequence of this. Forty percent of the pupils, as has been noted earlier, had no unexplained absence in the first two terms of the school year and hence the total group could not be split equally into five groups as was done for explained absence. Instead the first group consists of the 40% of pupils with no unexplained absence while the next three groups match the last three of Table 7.

Table 8: Mean awards for various levels of unexplained absence

	English Standard Grade award	Mathematics Standard Grade award
Group	Mean award	Mean award
All pupils	3.0	3.7
Pupils with no absence	2.7	3.1
Median absent 20%	2.9	3.4
Next most absent 20%	3.3	4.3
Most absent 20%	3.7	4.8

The same pattern found in Table 7, of decreasing mean award with increasing absence, is clearly present, and of a similar scale. The difference in mean award between the most and least absent groups is 1.0 grades in English and 1.7 grades in mathematics. While not negligible, given the range of absence covered these differences are not strikingly large, which confirms the earlier observation that attendance is not the sole influence on attainment.

The implication of this descriptive examination of the data is that a link does exist between unexplained absence and performance in the direction anticipated, greater absence being associated with lower awards, but that it is not a strong link. However, this is an overall statement and, as we have seen, there is considerable variation in absence rates between pupils gaining identical Standard Grade awards. Although we cannot demonstrate this, there may also be variation in the extent to which individual pupils who are frequently absent would benefit from greater attendance at school.

In the section that follows, regression analysis is used to obtain more precise estimates of the nature of the link between absence and attainment. These too point to a weak overall connection, but also suggest this may arise from significant differences between schools, a strong connection in some being offset by an almost non-existent connection in others.

All school regressions

For these analyses, four variables were used as measures of absence:

1. the percentage of explained absence
2. the percentage of unexplained absence
3. the maximum length of explained absence
4. the maximum length of unexplained absence.

The last two variables in this list were intended as indicators of 'persistent' absence. Different people use the phrase 'persistent truant' in different ways. For some it means simply a pupil who loses a lot of school time through truancy. Others tend to think in terms of frequency of truanting: the pupil who takes many, albeit short, breaks from school is a persistent truant. Yet other people associate some idea of a long period of absence with persistence: a pupil who was absent for 20 consecutive days would be a persistent truant, whereas one who was off every other day for 40 days would not. We adopted this last view and tried to implement it by using the length of the single longest period of consecutive absence for each pupil as a measure of his, or her, persistence. However, this attempt was not successful; at least, it was not convincingly successful. As will be appreciated, most pupils who have a single long consecutive period of absence will also have a high total absence rate and, vice versa, pupils with short single absences will more likely than not have small total absence rates. This correlation between the two measures proved too close for the regression analyses unequivocally to separate out a distinct 'persistence' factor.

Only pupils who gained an award in Standard Grade English or mathematics have been included in these regressions. Pupils graded 'no award' were omitted for the reason noted earlier, the difficulty of fixing a numerical value to a 'no award'. There were 50 such pupils. As was seen in Tables 5a and 5b their attendance can be interpreted as not following a pattern consistent with that of pupils who did gain awards. This is a further reason for excluding them.

The following patterns of variables emerged from the several regressions done using the data from all the schools combined. For these regressions, two measures of attainment were used. For an explanation of the second, 'Standardised English plus maths', see the Technical Appendix.

Table 9: Occurrence of significant coefficients ('Yes') between various measures of absence and various indicators of performance (all pupils)

	English plus maths	Standardised English plus maths
% explained absence	Yes	Yes
% unexplained absence	Yes	Yes
maximum duration unexplained absence	–	–
maximum duration explained absence	–	–

Table 10: Occurrence of significant coefficients ('Yes') between various measures of absence and various indicators of performance (boys)

	English plus maths	Standardised English plus maths
% explained absence	Yes	Yes
% unexplained absence	Yes	Yes
maximum duration unexplained absence	–	–
maximum duration explained absence	–	–

Table 11: Occurrence of significant coefficients ('Yes') between various measures of absence and various indicators of performance (girls)

	English plus maths	Standardised English plus maths
% explained absence	Yes	Yes
% unexplained absence	Yes	Yes
maximum duration unexplained absence	–	–
maximum duration explained absence	–	–

As the tables show, the two measures of simple absence time, percentage of explained and percentage of unexplained time, occur in all regressions. Time away from school is related to final performance.

The regression coefficients of the percentages of explained and unexplained absence are very similar in all the cases, as illustrated by the figures in the following tables, 12a and 12b.

Regressions between explained and unexplained absence and two indicators of performance

Table 12a

English/maths	Number of cases	Explained absence	Unexplained absence	Percentage of variance explained
All pupils	1125	0.10	0.11	19.0
Boys	532	0.10	0.09	16.1
Girls	593	0.10	0.12	23.8

Table 12b

Standardised English/maths	Number of cases	Explained absence	Unexplained absence	Percentage of variance explained
All pupils	1125	0.07	0.08	18.6
Boys	532	0.07	0.06	15.9
Girls	593	0.07	0.08	23.3

Equality of coefficients for explained and unexplained absence would mean that each of these contributed equally to the relationship with performance: a day's explained absence would have the same effect on performance as a day's unexplained absence. Examination of the pair of tables above would suggest that near-equality holds in the present case, ie, a day's explained absence and a day's unexplained absence have a very similar effect on attainment. It is time away from school that is the relevant factor. Whether or not this time spent away is covered by an explanation does not matter. In statistical terms, truancy, per se, is no more harmful than any other absence.

To confirm the approximately equal effect of explained and unexplained absence on lowering attainment, the regressions were repeated, exchanging these two variables for two others. The two others were, respectively: the sum of explained and unexplained absence for each pupil, and the difference between the explained and unexplained absence for each pupil. The first of these is readily enough understood: it is the total absence time, expressed as a percentage, for each pupil. The second is less readily understood. In essence it is an indicator variable, showing how the total absence divides between the two components of explained and unexplained absence. In every one of the repeated regressions the first new variable, total absence, entered significantly but in no case did the second new variable, the difference variable, do so. These results confirm our previous conclusion: that total time absent is the critical factor affecting attainment and that the form the absence takes, whether covered by an explanation or truancy, is irrelevant.

The quantitative conclusion to be drawn from the results on the relationship between attendance and attainment is that every one percentage point increase in absence is associated with a drop of 0.1 grade points in the combined English and mathematics Standard Grade score. For example, if, as is approximately the case, the average of the sum of the English and mathematics Standard Grade awards for pupils who are absent for 15% of the time is 9.0 grade units, then the average award for those absent 16% of the time would be 8.9 grade units. Put another way: as there are 190 days in the school year, each 1.9 days of absence above the average of 28.5 days decreases the total of the English and mathematics grades gained by pupils by 0.1 of a grade.

It is not true, in reality, that every pupil does equally well in English and mathematics. However, it is useful here to think of the 'average' pupil as doing so, in which case the 0.1 grade drop in the total grade can be thought of as made up of 0.05 of a drop in English and 0.05 of a drop in mathematics. Thus, for the 'average' pupil, an increase of 1.9 days in absence in S4 leads to a lowering of their Standard Grade English award by 0.05 of a grade and similarly for their mathematics award. (Their other Standard Grade awards will, almost certainly, also be reduced but we do not have the data to say by how much.)

Putting the conclusion this way is to assume a strict one-way relationship between attendance and attainment and, as has already been remarked, this is not likely to be the case. Many other factors will influence Standard Grade performance in addition to the opportunity to learn. The figures quoted in the paragraphs above are therefore the extreme limits of the effect of absence on performance, assuming it can be increased or reduced without concomitant changes in these other factors. The issue of other perspectives on the data will be revisited after discussion of regressions for individual schools.

Individual school regressions

The regressions described in the last section used the combined data for all the schools. Regressions were also carried out for each school individually, for the purpose of determining how far individual schools departed from the overall trend. Readers who wish to consult the tables resulting from these regressions are referred to the Technical Appendix, Tables ii and iii.

Results for the simplest of these regressions (Table ii, Technical Appendix) show that there appear to be differences between schools. The greatest dependence of performance on absence was found in School 4, where a one percentage point increase in absence was connected to a 0.09 drop in Standard Grade performance (in English and in mathematics), and the smallest for School 7, where the corresponding drop was 0.04 of a grade. Other schools showed a range of dependencies between these two extreme values. It would probably not be sensible to attach great importance to the actual coefficient values for these schools; rather the differences should be taken to illustrate the likely extent of variation between schools.

By and large the dependency between absence and performance seemed to be independent of sex, but, if anything, it tended to be greater for girls than for boys in the same school.

Regressions were also run in which the two components of absence, explained and unexplained, were separated (see Table iii, Technical Appendix). While the overall regressions discussed earlier pointed to near-equality of the effects of explained and unexplained absence, the main consequence of disaggregating these data to the school level was, in general, to reveal a difference in the strength of their effects. The picture that emerges, however, is complex. It is hard to discern any common pattern. Instead of one theme finding expression in seven variations, it is more a case of seven themes, each school revealing a different pattern.

Take first the results for boys and girls combined. In five schools the effect of unexplained absence is stronger than that of explained absence. In two the reverse holds. However, these two schools (see Table 2: Schools 1 and 7) were those with the lowest rates of unexplained absence, so their exceptional status is understandable, except that three other schools had unexplained absence rates almost as low and yet belong to the majority group of five schools. The pattern within this group of five is not uniform either. For one school, number 2, the coefficient for unexplained absence is only slightly greater than that for explained absence, while for the other four it is two to three times as large. In this case there is no apparent, ready connection between the absence rates shown in Table 2and the one school on the one hand and the four on the other.

Similarly the pattern for boys and girls is not uniform. It varies greatly, in some cases between schools and in others within the one school. In some schools the coefficients for unexplained absence were almost the same for boys and girls, whereas in others they differed, sometimes considerably, and not always in the same direction.

We cannot, from our data, do more to explain these differences between schools. We can show what differences there were, but explanation would seem to depend on factors particular to the individual schools, about which we have insufficient information.

Reverse regressions

The point has been made that absence is but one possible influence among several upon attainment. If project resources had allowed, it would have been sensible for the analyses to take additional account of factors such as the influence of social background, general ability and attitude to school. Even then, however, the idea that those factors have a direct and one-way influence on attainment is questionable. It is more probable that a number of factors including pupil attainment act mutually upon one another in a cyclic way, each reinforcing the other.

Although the present data do not allow us to examine such a complex process, we were able to obtain some feel of how much the simple model of direct one-way influence leading from absence to poor attainment that we have used might be misleading. For this we tried modelling the data in the reverse order. Instead of using attainment as the outcome and absence as the influence, we used absence as the outcome and attainment as the influence.

Analysing the data in this way can no more prove that attainment affects absence than can the previous analysis prove the contrary. Numerically, if the data show a relationship in one direction, there must also be a relationship in the other. However, such an analysis helps to clarify the implications of taking either of these extreme perspectives.

All the regressions used the combined English and mathematics Standard Grade awards as independent variable. Three different measures of time absent were used: the percentage of total absence, the percentage of explained absence and the percentage of unexplained absence. The results are shown in Tables 13a, b and c.

Reverse regressions between Standard Grade awards and various measures of absence

Table 13a

Percentage Total Absence	Number of cases	Constant	English plus maths SG Award	Percentage of variance explained
All	1125	–1.05	1.89	18.4
Boys	532	–1.05	1.71	16.2
Girls	593	–1.66	2.16	22.2

Table 13b

Percentage Explained Absence	Number of cases	Constant	English plus maths SG Award	Percentage of variance explained
All	1125	0.69	1.12	11.9
Boys	532	0.51	0.96	10.3
Girls	593	0.26	1.37	15.6

Table 13c

Percentage Unexplained Absence	Number of cases	Constant	English plus maths SG Award	Percentage of variance explained
All	1125	–1.96	0.80	9.8
Boys	532	–1.52	0.74	7.6
Girls	593	–2.35	0.86	12.2

Viewed in this way, the data show that for every decrease in the combined English and mathematics Standard Grade award of one grade unit, explained and unexplained absence both increased on average by about 1%. Pupils who were 0.5 of a grade less able than their peers in mathematics (or English) were likely to be absent for nearly 2% of the time (or 3.8 days per year) more than the other pupils.

Looked at from either perspective, therefore, the link between absence and attainment, or attainment and absence, is not strong. If attendance is treated as the cause of attainment then, as noted previously, a 1% reduction in absence leads to a 0.05 improvement in Standard Grade performance in mathematics. To put this into context, typically a pupil would need to reduce his or her absence by 38 days a year to gain an extra grade in mathematics. If, on the other hand, low attainment is seen as causing absence, then as we have just found, a 0.5 improvement in Standard Grade mathematics is associated with a 2% improvement in attendance. Thus typically raising a pupil's attainment in mathematics by one whole grade leads to their attending school 3.8 days more.

Staff views of the effects of truancy on pupils who truant

Guidance and subject teachers were asked what they thought were the main effects of truancy on the truants themselves. The majority said that the academic performance of these pupils was impaired, and felt this to be of crucial importance for the pupils as it would affect their chances of employment when they left school.

Subject teachers stressed that the intensive nature of the current curriculum with its emphasis on continuous assessment and investigations made the issue of missed work more important than it might have been in the past. Now more than ever continuity of attendance was crucial to attainment, particularly in 'sequential' subjects such as maths where understanding of new content was based on, and required, previous knowledge. 'Maths requires building on what you have already learned,' one of the teachers told us. 'If you miss parts of the work it all becomes unclear.' Several subject teachers added that classes tended to be so large that teachers had relatively little time to spend with individual pupils. This meant that work missed, for any reason, was very difficult to catch up on.

Some teachers admitted that they sometimes resented putting in extra work to help truants, especially if they were known to be persistent. There was a tendency to see it as pointless, as the following comment illustrates:

> *It's a problem. You're trying to bring someone up to standard and you actually know that there's no point in giving them work to do at home, it won't get done ... There's no great sense of actually really wanting to spend time wit someone who is not going to be there for the next week. There is a slight unwillingness, a grudgingness in spending time with someone on a futile exercise.*

The majority of staff, including most of the headteachers, pointed out that if pupils had come from backgrounds in which education had a low value, they were likely to have a history of low motivation and application, perhaps over a period of years. Teachers felt that because of this alone such pupils' academic performance suffered, but truancy would exacerbate the problem.

Although poor academic performance was the main effect of truancy identified by those we interviewed, there were thought to be other effects too. These included alienation from classmates, loss of motivation and loss of self-confidence and esteem, which would feed the cycle of demotivation and social isolation.

Asked if they thought truants realised that missing school was likely to affect them badly, guidance staff were almost equally divided in their views. Most subject teachers, however, agreed that truants did not realise what the effects of truancy were likely to be, in spite of school efforts to get pupils to associate regular attendance with achievement.

When we asked if pupils thought these were important effects, those who believed pupils were aware of them suggested not. Pupils worked to short-term goals; they found it hard to worry about damaging career opportunities which were limited anyway; they did not always see good examination performance as relevant to their lives. The more able were thought to be more aware of the effects of their truancy and, when possible, this awareness was used to counter pupils' non-attendance.

These were the views held by secondary staff on the effects that truancy would have on truant pupils. What did the pupils themselves think?

The effects of truancy on the truants themselves: the questionnaires

The information we have from secondary 'truant' pupils derives from two sources: a questionnaire in which truants identified themselves as having failed to come to school at some point during the school year 1993/94, and follow-up interviews with a small number of these respondents. Over the whole secondary school sample, we had aimed to secure questionnaire responses from 50 truants; in practice, we managed to obtain data from 25. Of these, eight allowed us to interview them in more detail about various issues they had raised in their questionnaire.

Contrary to the expectations held by most of the subject teachers, over half these young people seemed to understand that truanting was likely to affect them badly. Most knew that their school work had been affected and many were worried about it, realising that their chances of obtaining qualifications and eventual employment were in jeopardy. A small number of the truants indicated that they had been excluded from extra-curricular group activities by being told they could not join in or through being made to feel unwelcome: interestingly, some claimed that this experience had put them off missing school.

We asked the truants if they felt teachers ever treated them differently from the other pupils. Some claimed that they did, and when asked in what way, responded that the teachers did not help them. Instead, the teacher reactions they described ranged from making fun of them to refusal to help. The following selection of comments written by the truants themselves illustrates this range.

> *One teacher said I'm not coming to help you, the ones who come regular should get seen first.*
>
> *If they didn't have the time when I came back they wouldn't help me.*
>
> *They speak to you more unpolite and treat you as though you're not there.*
>
> *They would make fun because I was off so much.*

Whether the truth was that the teachers actually did react in this way, or that the truants, already disillusioned with school, exaggerated their experience, we cannot say. However, all these reactions could be ways in which resentful teachers might show that resentment. In the main, pupils were upset by this treatment.

Effects of truancy on staff

We had felt that it would be the guidance and subject teachers who would come into most contact with truant pupils in the course of their working day and who would therefore be the most affected by truancy. For that reason we asked those interviewed if pupils playing truant had any effect on them, and if so, what this was.

One of the most common effects they described was stress as a result of an added workload. The additional work truancy gave them was of different kinds. In the case of guidance staff it took the form of extra unexplained absences to chase up and act upon. Their stress was intensified by the pastoral element of their work, which gave them insight into the truant pupils' personal situations and feelings.

For subject teachers the additional work was caused by the increased strain on class management. Constant absences were disruptive and teachers found it difficult to plan lessons in the structured ways that were necessary for effective teaching. In addition, spending time with pupils who had missed school deliberately to go over 'old material' took up time which should have been spent moving on to other, planned work.

Staff sometimes saw truant pupils as disruptive pupils, and there was some evidence that their continued absence can come as a relief; three teachers told us that staff could come to see the absence as a positive thing in that it removed disruptive pupils from their classes.

Effects of truancy on good attenders

In addition to the data from truant pupils reported above, we also collected questionnaire information from 51 good attenders. While their views were less central to our interests than those of the truant group, we nevertheless found what they had to tell us about the circumstances in which they would skip school, the extent to which their classmates' truanting affected them, and what they thought could be done to encourage greater attendance at school relevant to our research.

Asked whether truant behaviour affected them in class, most of the good attenders said no. These pupils took the view that 'I just get on with my work, they do what they want.' Twenty pupils claimed there was some effect on them, however, which is a large minority. Responses to the invitation to open comment suggest that these effects arose from:

- teachers going over material
- not being able to get on with group work, if truants were members
- truant friends asking good attenders to cover for them
- tension in class between truants and teachers.

However, the majority of good attenders felt that it was the truants themselves who were being affected the most. Subject teachers tended to agree.

Effects of truancy on the school as a whole

Most of the headteachers interviewed voiced awareness that if truancy became a problem in a school it would affect that school's reputation adversely. The school's image could suffer, and local people were likely to compare the school with others. Morale would drop. A few headteachers commented on how much extra work truancy engendered both for guidance staff and for the school administrative system, which could be struggling to cope. Similar views were expressed by guidance and subject teachers, the latter adding their concern that the schools' performance rate in national examinations would be poorer, the greater the incidence of truancy.

However, asked how great a problem they thought truancy was, compared to other problems, only a minority of the secondary headteachers had experience of truancy levels in their schools which were sufficiently high to cause especial concern. In these schools there had been complaints from local residents about the numbers of truant pupils 'hanging around' the area. These headteachers' worries about truancy as a school problem were accompanied by a fear that statistics on attendance levels in schools would be used as 'league tables', which, the headteachers felt, would ignore the factors affecting the levels of attendance in their particular schools.

In summary

From secondary schools, then, we have presented numerical data which were subjected to statistical analysis, findings from interviews with staff and findings from questionnaires to both truant and good attender groups. The statistical analyses made it clear that absence from school and performance in Standard Grade were related, but also cautioned against interpreting this to mean that absence brings about poor performance. Many other factors must be taken into account, and although the data gathered for this study justify the tentative suggestion that social background and general ability are two of these, they do not allow us to state this more strongly. Although data gathered from staff and pupils reveal a perception that the major result of missing school was indeed impaired academic performance with its consequences of damaged career prospects, the issue was not considered to be one of simple cause and effect. Teachers thought performing badly and truanting were related in a self-renewing cycle: the more a pupil was absent, the poorer she or he did in school work and the more likely she or he was to truant again. Truants claimed both to be aware of the consequences of missing school and, for the most part, to be worried about them; their perception was that teachers were not interested in helping them catch up on missed work. From the teachers' point of view, truancy meant extra work, disrupted planning and frustration. Neither they nor the 'good attender' pupils felt that other pupils in the class were much affected by others' truancy, though good attenders experienced some frustration when they had to endure teachers going over work already covered for the sake of the truants. Headteachers felt that if truancy was a problem in a school its public image would suffer.

■ Points from Chapter Three

Primary schools

Primary school teachers thought that if pupils missed school, the quality of their school work would drop. However, they also believed that pupil performance at school was affected by personal and social factors as well as by the extent of a pupil's absence, and some expressed the opinion that failing to learn how to fit into society was as important an effect for truants as falling behind in school work. Teachers did not think that good attenders were affected much when truants missed school helping them to catch up, the other pupils received less help.

Opinions in secondary schools

Secondary school teachers agreed with primary school teachers that missing school would lead to poor performance, and that the quality of a pupil's performance at school was affected by social and personal factors. They thought that good attenders were usually unaffected by truants and truant behaviour, but echoed primary teachers' concern that good attenders would have less of the teachers' time if it had to be spent with truants. Most of the good attenders felt that truants' behaviour had little to do with them. S4 truants knew they could fall behind and get poorer marks, and most of them were uneasy about this. They felt that when they returned to school, staff did not want to help them.

The statistical association between attendance and attainment

At secondary level, the analysis of school attendance records and Standard Grade results confirmed the existence of a link between attendance and attainment: as the level of absence increased, the level of Standard Grade award decreased. In general, for every 1% rise in absence (explained or unexplained) Standard Grade awards for both English and mathematics dropped by 0.05grades. This was true for both mathematics and English language, but absence had a greater bearing on attainment in mathematics. Boys and girls were almost equally affected by absence, whether it was explained or unexplained. However, there was considerable variation among schools in the strength of association between absence and performance at Standard Grade, and these findings assume that no factors other than absence are affecting attainment.

The school in the community

Headteachers in both primary and secondary schools thought high truancy rates would give any school a poor image, but in most of the schools truancy was not believed to be a problem.

4 Why pupils miss school

To address the issue of why some pupils chose to miss school, we set out to gather information through interviews with staff, pupils and parents at both secondary and primary levels, as well as through brief questionnaires to pupils. We turn first to the primary schools.

■ Information from primary schools

Staff views of why pupils miss school

As far as primary headteachers and class teachers were concerned, the immediate reason why pupils were truants was that parents kept them away from school. Primary staff also stressed that many of the reasons why parents caused their children to miss school grew out of practical problems such as not having access to child care, the need to wait until the family allowance cheque was cashed before children could be taken shopping for clothes and single parents having to go out to work. A small number of headteachers said that in their experience economic hardship could make some parents send their pupils to school to receive free school meals.

Other reasons for pupils not coming to school were thought to include:

- being unhappy
- being encouraged to stay off by other pupils
- pure dislike of school.

We asked headteachers and class teachers what attitudes towards truancy they had encountered among parents. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, in the light of the foregoing opinions, all P7 teachers and all but one of the headteachers and P4 teachers told us that parents were usually cooperative about the truancy once the school had taken the issue up.

Those, then, were the views of primary school staff. What were pupils' views about reasons for playing truant? What would tempt them to miss school? We turn now to the information we have from P4 and P7 children.

Pupils' opinions about playing truant

It is important to state that we felt there was a need to couch the questions we asked of primary school children on this issue carefully, using a different approach from that taken in the instruments we had constructed for secondary pupils. As a result, responses from the secondary and primary pupils are not directly comparable. The primary pupils were presented with stories about other young people who had truanted or were tempted to truant, and were asked questions based on these stories. This means the responses they gave tended to reveal ways of thinking about potential truancy rather than being absolute indicators that these pupils had played truant. This being said, the questions were designed to uncover what attitudes the primary children had towards truanting, whether they had ever played truant themselves and what the reasons for this might be. The pupils' responses to the second of these questions were reported in chapter two; they raise the possibility that more primary pupils play truant than official and teachers' estimates suggest.

But did the pupils realise that playing truant was wrong? The data strongly suggest that they did: asked to comment on the behaviour of 'Alec', who in the story had pretended to be ill so that he need not go to school, the majority of pupils thought this was wrong.

Believing that it would be wrong to skip school, what reasons would primary pupils have for doing it? A question about strategies that could be used to miss school had been followed with another, open question, 'Why might you want to miss school?' When the reasons pupils offered were analysed they fell into groups as follows:

	Number of comments	
	P4	**P7**
if school was boring/ you disliked it, etc.	43	53
if you were too tired/ wanted to stay in bed	25	-
if there was too much work	19	12
if you disliked the teacher	3	10
if you were being bullied	-	27
if you were frightened of doing tests	-	7

It seems that, by P7, pupils being tired seems no longer to be a reason for missing school, while two new reasons have appeared: fear of bullying and, to a lesser degree, fear of tests.

While we should be careful not to make the assumption that the children offering these as possible reasons for wanting to miss school felt this way themselves, these responses give some insight into what pupils do *not* want from their school experience – boredom. It is interesting to note that none of the primary school staff we interviewed offered boredom with school as a possible reason why a pupil might not attend, and very few suggested that pupils might miss school if they disliked it. However, the pupil response that school was boring is likely to take in a range of more detailed reasons which the relative bluntness of the approach we used to gather information from primary pupils could not uncover.

In addition to these data, we have others from a different set of questions which give further understanding of the way children think about truanting and the circumstances under which they would consider skipping school. The pupils were given six mini-stories or 'scenarios', devised by the research team, in which a fictional child had both the opportunity and the motive for playing truant. The pupils were then asked which of a number of broadly consistent options they would choose in each case, if they were that child. One of these options was 'skip school' (the others were 'go to school', sometimes with conditions attached, and 'don't know').

This exercise set out to test the strength of a number of motives for truancy, which are listed on the following page, together with the numbers of pupils in each case who claimed they would have played truant in these circumstances.

Numbers of pupils claiming they would skip school if ...	P4	P7
• mum (or whoever looked after them) needed help at home	96*	105*
• they did not like their teacher	36	12
• their friends wanted them to	20	11
• they were worrying about their school work	20	4
• they had not done their homework	18	13
• they were being bullied at school	17	13

* These figures include both the option of helping mum through staying away from school, and a separate one in which pupils could choose to help mum then go to school late.

As can be seen, only one of these motives seemed strong enough to persuade the majority of the pupils to play truant: responding to the scenario in which 'Julie's' mum had asked her to stay home and help around the house, the pupils were considerably more likely to help mum than go to school, although many, particularly in P7, chose the option of going to school late once mum had been helped. Parental influence, these responses suggest, is strong.

Given the strength of this influence, what did the pupils think would be their parents' attitudes if they themselves chose to play truant? Asked if they thought their mothers, or whoever looked after them, would be cross if they pretended to be ill like the boy in the story, 70% of the P4 pupils and 87% of those in P7 thought they would indeed be angry. A further, open, question asked when their parents would think it was all right for them to miss school: almost all pupil responses indicated that their parents would not approve their missing school without good cause, and that their parents' views of what kinds of absences were acceptable were similar to those expressed by school staff.

What pupils did when not at school

Although the evidence suggests that, overall, truancy among primary school children is uncommon, we were nevertheless interested in finding out what pupils who did miss school for unacceptable reasons did in their illicitly gained time.

Staff views

It might be predicted from the data already reported that if parents arrange the absences, then pupils are with their parents. Not unexpectedly, many of the primary classroom teachers interviewed and most of the headteachers stressed this. One headteacher remarked that often the children would simply be in bed; pupils sleeping in, she said, was one of the biggest problems. Nine teachers told us of occasions on which truants had been seen by staff or other pupils playing locally instead of being at school, but there were no examples given of pupils who had been seen truanting with friends.

Pupils' views of what truants do when not at school

As with the issue of whether these pupils had played truant, we felt the need of a careful approach to this question. We therefore asked it hypothetically: 'If you took a day off school and nobody caught you, what would you do?' In themselves, therefore, these responses indicate no more than that the activities specified were attractive alternatives to school. The replies were left completely open but as many as 76 children in P4 and 82 children in P7 responded. The activities they named were categorised as follows:

... What would you do?	**P4** **N = 76** %	**P7** **N = 76** %
• play with toys/computers at home	59	40
• watch TV/listen to music	13	23
• wander about outside	13	20
• read	9	11
• draw or write	3	4
• lie in bed	3	2

Fifty per cent of the P4 and 58% of the P7 pupils also told us they would spend their day alone.

Particularly in the light of the slight changes in reasons for missing school that can be seen between the P4 and P7 responses, we were interested to know if by the time pupils reached secondary school, the motives for playing truant differed yet again. We turn therefore to the information we have about this from secondary schools, and begin by examining the opinions offered by staff.

Information from secondary schools

Staff views of why pupils miss school

Perhaps because they had a wider experience of truant pupils than teachers in primary schools, those in the secondary sector suggested many reasons why young people might play truant. We therefore grouped them into three main categories. These are:

- belonging to social groups affected by high levels of deprivation/poverty
- conflict between home priorities and attendance at school
- school based factors.

Although these categories are useful for the purposes of this discussion, they are by no means clear-cut; as the following makes clear, the second and third, for example, are very much related to and affected by the first.

Belonging to social groups affected by high levels of deprivation/poverty

As with primary school teachers, many of the secondary school staff believed that having a background of social deprivation was an important factor in whether or not pupils played truant. The staff felt that parents in such circumstances often put a limited value on education, and in their experience the attainment of children from such backgrounds in formal qualifications tended to be lower than for pupils from other backgrounds. They pointed out that such pupils often had limited vocational and social opportunities, and that their prevailing attitude could be summarised as being: 'What's the use of going to school when it won't help me get a job?'

Conflict between home priorities and attending school

A common opinion amongst staff in secondary schools was that many truants' parents felt that school was less important than family demands. Such a view, they thought, exerted a strong influence on pupils who truanted. Like the primary headteachers, however, almost all secondary school headteachers stressed that parents with negative attitudes to school made up a very small proportion of the parents who had children at the school. Headteachers thought that most parents, including those from economically disadvantaged areas, were supportive of the schools in their attempts to deal with attendance problems.

School based factors

School-based factors thought to influence pupils' likelihood to truant featured far more commonly in the interviews with secondary school staff than with primary. They included:

- dislike of particular subjects, especially when pupils saw them as irrelevant to the employment or training opportunities available after leaving school (this was the most commonly mentioned school factor)
- difficulties with particular subjects
- peer pressure from other pupils in the class.

It is notable that secondary school teachers ascribed negative pupil views of lessons to dislike of subjects, rather than boredom with them or the school experience more generally, as primary pupils had claimed. As will be seen, the issue of boredom was also raised by some secondary pupils.

It is worth noting that many headteachers and teachers pointed out that the assessment arrangements for Standard Grade penalised truants more than the assessment arrangements for the old 'O' Grade had done. Unlike 'O' Grade, Standard Grade required pupils to complete regular and specific assignments on the basis of which teachers made school-based assessments of the pupils' achievement. The Scottish Examination Board took both these school-based assessments and the pupils' examination results into account when awarding final grades. Under this system a pupil who truanted ran the risk of missing an important assignment and its associated marks. The more often the instances of truancy, the more marks a pupil missed, the greater the effect on his or her final Standard Grade award was likely to be and the greater the lack of motivation.

Other factors, though less commonly mentioned, were thought to include

- personality clashes or dislike of certain teachers
- 'quieter pupils' being intimidated by the size of secondary school
- bullying
- school phobia and other psychological problems.

Secondary staff, then, most commonly cited school factors as reasons why pupils played truant. However, the information so far presented in this chapter also suggests that pupils play truant for reasons more complex than school problems alone. As we have seen, headteachers and guidance teachers in particular felt that pupils were less likely to see the relevance of school if their social backgrounds were deprived and/or their educational attainment levels were low; and these staff believed that pupils were especially likely to lose confidence in their ability to obtain good qualifications and employment if their experience was of high levels of unemployment in the areas where they lived. The teachers believed such pupils would feel there was little to gain from attending school.

So far we have concentrated on staff views of the factors responsible for truancy and non-attendance. We now turn to the information provided by S4 pupils about their views on and experiences of truancy.

Pupils' opinions of playing truant

The information reported in this section comes from questionnaires completed by the same 25 truant pupils whose opinions were presented earlier, in chapter three, and from the 51 'good attenders' who also completed questionnaires.

Patterns of truancy

Munn and Johnstone (1992) pointed out that to understand why pupils play truant it is important to look for patterns underlying absences. For this reason, before we move directly to the reasons the truant pupils offered for their failure to attend school, it will be useful to examine what the truants told us about these patterns.

Asked whether they had missed school 'regularly' or 'occasionally', about half the truants said they missed school regularly. Asked whether the truanting had been for days at a time, complete days or particular lessons, the truants replied as follows:

more than one day, including weeks	6
whole days	12
particular lessons or classes	7

We were interested to obtain information which would give us insight into the extent to which pupils tried to fool the school system into recording them as present when in fact they were not attending classes, and therefore asked the truants whether they had usually registered present at school in the morning or afternoon before skipping school. As the following figures illustrate, there was no evidence for this as a consistent pattern within our sample.

Yes	3
No	8
It varied	14

When we asked the truants if there was there a particular day or days they wanted to miss, views were divided:

Yes	11
No	13
Missing	1

The follow-up question revealed that when particular days were missed, they were most likely to be those before and after a weekend, ie Thursday, Friday and Monday. Within our small truant sample, then, absences were slightly more likely to be regular than occasional, most likely to be for whole days rather than parts of days and were not necessarily 'targeted' to particular days – though if they were, they were more likely to be Thursdays, Fridays and Mondays. Truants might or might not register present at school.

The possibility that days surrounding weekends were more likely than others to be missed suggests that the desire for more free time is a contributory factor to a pupil's disposition to truant. Was this corroborated by data provided by the pupils? We turn now to the reasons that the truants themselves gave for missing school.

Reasons for playing truant

Truants completed both closed and open-ended questions about their reasons for missing school. How many ticked each of the reasons offered in one question is shown overleaf; as this list illustrates, lack of motivation appears to be predominant in most of these pupils' decisions not to come to school.

	Number of responses
I'm just not interested	13
I'd rather be earning money at work	11
Someone was bullying me	3
The work at school was too hard	3
I felt I couldn't please the teacher	2
I think the teachers were threatening	1
The 'late' system put me off	1

As will be realised, the two most commonly identified of these factors support the view held by secondary school staff that young people truant mainly because they have little interest in being at school. A preference for being at work, earning money, is a more specific way of expressing this lack of interest. Not all truants thought school lessons were necessarily boring, however; one truant wrote on his questionnaire that he went to the classes he enjoyed but ignored those he had picked 'to fill a column' because he found them valueless.

All the possible reasons for choosing not to come to school offered in the list above belong to what we have called the 'school-based factors' category. What of the other groups? A different question asked truants to indicate from a given list whether there was anything at home which meant they missed school. A small number of truants, all girls, responded to this, indicating 'I had to look after someone' and 'I had to help with housework or shopping'.

These data suggest that for whatever reason, most of the truant pupils in our sample stayed away from school not because they were being bullied, had difficulties with work or did not get on with teachers, nor because there were overwhelmingly pressing demands from home. According to their own accounts, they simply perceived school as uninteresting and of less value than being at work would be. However, unless staff opinions are to be discounted, we felt that there was more to it than that. The interviews we were able to hold with the eight truants offered an opportunity to explore truant thinking in greater detail.

The interviews, and we must remember there were only eight, did allow some of the secondary pupils to elaborate points they had made in their questionnaires. Two pupils had only truanted on a very small number of occasions before seeing that 'it was not worth it' and being persuaded by guidance staff that school was worth attending. The remaining six were far more disillusioned with school. They saw the school days as too intensive and long, while lessons were boring and irrelevant to their concerns. They thought that pupils should be able to choose subjects they saw as likely to be useful.

All the young people interviewed were aware of the probable effects of truancy on their exams and were anxious about them. This anxiety had largely been the incentive for the two 'reformed' truants to attend more. Being aware of the possible effects non-attendance could have on their school work, however, did not encourage the more persistent truants to attend school regularly, although the possibility of having more work experience appealed to them. There were no particular subjects they wished to avoid, each pupil preferring and disliking a different mix.

All these pupils felt their class teachers were either too busy or unwilling to invest much time assisting them with course work when they were in school. All said their parents were against their missing school and had been angry with them for doing so. In addition, the interviews provided some insight into the ingenuity and complexity of pupil strategies for missing school, such as working the recording system or forging parents' notes and planning ahead with friends to skip school.

We were interested to discover that some of the views expressed by the truant pupils were potentially shared by the non-truant group. Asked if they would ever miss classes or days at school when they knew they ought to be there, seven of the 51 pupils in the 'good attenders' category indicated that they would and 14 were unsure. Asked what could be done to encourage pupils not to miss school, 19 said if subjects were more interesting or if more choice was available to pupils then pupils would be more likely to attend. This was the most commonly cited view and mirrors the view of most truants. The next most common factor they gave was that if teachers were more approachable and understanding truancy would be reduced. Interestingly, an additional reason for missing school given by some good attenders was the need for time to catch up on assignments, an indication that these pupils had their own views of the relative values of different classes or subjects.

What truants do when they are not at school

We have shown that most of our secondary truant sample missed school because they found the lessons boring or irrelevant. When not at school, however, what else might truant pupils be doing that had greater attraction? And were these alternatives likely to be conducted when pupils were alone, or in the company of friends? We asked for staff views on these questions, as well as for those of the pupils themselves.

Staff views

Few of the responses we received from secondary staff to the question of what truants did were based on experience. The teachers supposed that the activities of truants varied but there was a belief that the truants who would be most likely to truant in groups would miss school occasionally, rather than persistently, and would be likely to hang around in shopping areas, in parks or by other local attractions. Truants in rural areas were thought likely to spend their time in secluded or distant places, because at home they would soon be spotted, and some staff pointed out that lone children in such situations, especially girls, were at risk. Other staff thought that truants gathered in each other's homes while their parents were out at work. While a few of the teachers believed that truants were sometimes involved in criminal activities, they stressed that this had little direct connection with truancy: such pupils were likely to have been involved in criminal activities whether they were meant to be at school or whether they were using their own time.

S4 truant views

When the pupils were asked whether they usually truanted alone or with others, most said that it varied. When they were with other people these would be either classmates or friends from their neighbourhood, and were usually around the same age as themselves. But where did they go, and what did they do?

Asked to indicate from a number of possibilities where they usually went when they skipped school, the 25 truants responded as follows:

A range of places	10
Home	5
Somewhere near home	5
To shops	3
Somewhere near school	2

We followed this with an open question designed to probe into what the truants usually did when not in school. The most common response was that they would 'hang around', whether on their own or more typically with a friend or small group in parks, shopping centres or the house of a pupil whose parents worked all day. Just talking seemed to be the most popular pastime at these gatherings. Occasionally responses included watching TV and playing with computer games.

Three key factors seemed to make these things attractive. One is that they were perceived as less boring than school activities; the second is that although the activities were not necessarily exciting in themselves, it was the pupils who had chosen them; the third is that in doing something outside of school, pupils avoided, at least in the short term, hassle from teachers. The words of the truants speak for themselves:

> *Being at school you get bossed about just sitting ... But when you're out of school you can do whatever you want at any time.*

The S4 truant sample is very small. To date, however, we have been able to find very little direct comment from truant groups in other research, and for this reason alone the views of the young people summarised here have interest. It is impossible to say how representative their opinions are of those held by truant pupils more generally, but we feel that important issues have been raised. One of these is why so many of the truants who took part in our study found school boring and irrelevant to their own lives. Most of the activities they preferred can hardly be described as high adventure. The notion that they felt a need to escape from the confinement represented by school runs through several of the views expressed and leads us to wonder whether, for many of these pupils, what is offered at school can ever be other than tedious. To generate interest, an activity requires an input not only from the persons presenting and explaining it, but also from the others expected to participate, and if individuals are determined not to give that input, as many of these truants seemed determined, it is appropriate to ask why.

At several points so far the data have indicated the importance of parental attitudes to education as a factor influencing pupils' likelihood to play truant. We turn now to our last data set: telephone interviews with parents.

Interviews with parents

The number of parents we were able to interview was both small and selective, while the number of parents whose children had attendance problems was smaller still. It is clear that no general conclusions can be drawn from such small numbers, and that the value of these data is limited.

All the parents were asked the same questions, which aimed to find out what their attitudes were to the value of regular attendance and school more generally; whether they were happy with their children's school attendance patterns and if not, what had been done about it; and what, in their experience, might be the reasons why children were reluctant to go to school.

All the parents held positive views about the value of education, believing children needed success at school to obtain qualifications. However, they also believed that regular attendance was important for social reasons, because being at school taught children self-discipline and how to co-operate with others. The kinds of absences they considered acceptable agreed with those identified as such by school staff. Though one mother told us she had needed to write a note for the school because of a family crisis, usually notes to keep children away would only be written when it was clear the children were unwell.

Of the five secondary 'truant' parents we spoke with, one was now pleased with her daughter's attendance as her absences had been minimal and she had caught up on work missed. The remaining four were not happy. Two were single parents who, in association with the schools, had attempted a range of strategies to improve their children's attendance, including discussing the reasons why attending was important, encouraging them, personally taking them to school and even bribing and threatening when all else failed. All four of these parents of persistent truants were worried about their children's attendance problems and felt it was very difficult to know what to do. Three told us that the schools themselves were losing patience and hope in the battle to get the children to attend.

The four parents of persistent truants offered a number of possible reasons for their children's reluctance to attend school regularly. These included their children's lack of motivation and the influence of other pupils.

■ Points from Chapter Four

Primary school

Primary school teachers believed that when pupils were truants it was usually because their parents kept them away, giving regular school attendance a low priority compared to family demands. Pupils in P4 and P7 thought being bored at school and not liking subjects were understandable reasons for staying away, and many indicated that they would consider staying away from school if their mothers asked for their help. Those who had played truant were most likely to spend the time at home. However, nearly all the primary pupils also said their parents would not approve if they skipped school.

Secondary school

Secondary school teachers agreed that some truants' parents gave regular schools attendance a low priority and kept children off school to help with home related task such as going shopping. They also thought some parents passed the opinion that education was unimportant on to their children, and believed this view would be stronger in areas of high unemployment. However, the teachers thought that truants most often missed school to avoid subjects they disliked or found difficult. Less often, they thought reasons for playing truant could be peer pressure, personality clashes between pupils and teachers intimidation by the size of secondary school, bullying, school phobia and other psychological problems. Some of the good attenders said that if subjects were more interesting and more choice was available pupils would be more likely to attend. Truants said they truanted because they were bored with school, and would rather be earning money at work. When they skipped school, they were most likely to gather together and talk.

5 Summary and comment

The statistical link between attendance, truancy and performance

The summary which follows has selected those findings which were generally found to be true among the schools in our sample. However, it should be remembered that there were large variations among the schools, and that at the level of individual institutions the picture was always more complex than a summary can reveal.

In every school but one, the rate of explained absence (that is, the percentage of pupil time lost) was higher than the rate of unexplained absence. Rates varied widely between schools, however: average explained absence rates ranged from 5.1% to 13.5%, and average unexplained absence rates from 0.7% to 11.8%. Absence rates for boys and girls in the same school were very similar, although girls tended to have slightly more explained absence than boys.

Moreover, in all the schools, the numbers of pupils with explained absences were greater than the numbers of pupils with unexplained absences. During the first two terms of 1993/4, at least 89% of pupils in each school registered some explained absence. With respect to unexplained absence, however, the percentages of pupils with unexplained absences ranged from 14% at the low end of the range and 89% at the high end. Two schools registered unexplained absence above 85%, one at 14%, and the remaining four between 40% and 70%.

The statistical analysis of school attendance records and Standard Grade results confirmed the existence of a link between attendance and attainment. As absence increased, on average Standard Grade awards dropped by at least 0.05 of a grade per subject for every 1.9 days' absence above the average quoted.[1] This pattern was revealed in both mathematics and English results, although mathematics results were slightly more affected than English results. Interestingly, the effects of absence were comparable whether the absence was explained or unexplained[2]. Overall, absence also showed similar effects for boys and girls.

This general pattern of attainment falling as absence increased held in all seven schools, but the link between attendance and performance varied in strength from school to school, and at the level of individual schools the picture grew more complex[3]. In addition, there was wide variation in absence rates between pupils gaining the same level of award, suggesting that there were factors other than absence which influenced pupils' performance in Standard Grade.

Factors which influence pupils to play truant

Few primary school teachers claimed to have much direct experience of truancy. However, almost all attributed such as there was in primary schools to those parents for whom family needs, such as looking after relatives, were more important than making sure their children attended school regularly.

Secondary school staff tended to share this view, many also feeling that parents who had a low opinion of the value of school were likely to pass this on to their children so that they too gave education low priority and began to miss school of their own volition. Many teachers thought these attitudes would be strongest in areas of high unemployment. However, most often secondary school teachers thought that pupils played truant to avoid spending time on subjects they disliked, especially if they could not see how these subjects were relevant to them.

Information coming from the primary pupils themselves showed that, even as early as P4, the children thought it was understandable to stay away from school if they were bored with it or disliked the subjects they were doing. Relatively large numbers of children in both P4 and P7 also indicated that they would consider staying away from school if their mothers or whoever looked after them needed their help; but almost all the primary pupils were sure their parents would not approve their missing school unless they were ill or there had been an important family crisis such as a bereavement.

The view coming from the S4 truant pupils was primarily that boredom with school, coupled with a preference for being at work earning money, was the chief reason why they truanted. Some support for the idea that school could be boring came from 'good attender' pupils who indicated that if school were more interesting and there were more choice of subjects, pupils would be less likely to skip it[4].

The impact of truancy

On truants

Staff in both primary and secondary schools thought that one of the most important effects of truancy was that it hindered learning; pupils achieved less at school. However, they also cited other effects, related to pupils' ability to fit into society and develop a sense of self-discipline. A particular primary staff concern was that pupils who became used to irregular attendance early in school life might develop a lasting habit of non-attendance. The view of the truant pupils was that if they were absent their school work would be adversely affected[5]. Most of them were uneasy about this, and many felt that because they were truants, teachers were unwilling to help them catch up on missed work.

On regular attenders

Neither the primary teachers nor teachers in the secondary schools thought that pupils who attended school regularly were likely to be greatly affected if other pupils skipped school, although head teachers shared the staff view that good attenders were deprived of teacher time when teachers helped truant pupils to make up missed work. There was little evidence from pupils that young people other than the truants were much affected by truants' absence from classes[6].

On the staff and on the school as a whole

In general, because their experience of truancy was limited, most primary school staff felt relatively unaffected by truancy. However, head teachers reported greater administrative burdens when pupils played truant, and those classroom teachers who had needed to deal with truant pupils reported frustration in going over old ground and an extra workload as they tried to tailor lessons to the needs of returned pupils.

In the secondary schools, truancy had greater effects on staff. The main effect on guidance and subject teachers was the stress of an added workload, caused by the need for more complex classroom management and difficulties with lesson planning. As with the primary staff, teachers found it frustrating to go over old work.

Head teachers in both primary and secondary schools were aware that high truancy rates would give any school a poor public image, but for most the problem of truancy was not great enough to cause undue concern[7].

The extent to which the findings of this study are representative

At several points in this report we have stressed that a sample of seven primary schools and seven secondary schools is unlikely to be representative of primary and secondary schools more generally. Because of this, we can make no claims that our findings are generalisable. However, it remains the case that, as was pointed out in the introduction, the schools in each sector were carefully chosen to make sure that none was atypical. With regard to our findings, therefore, we feel it reasonable to claim that patterns similar to those we found could exist in other schools.

With respect to the statistical findings, the pattern of variation in amounts of truancy amongst the seven secondary schools seems likely to be repeated amongst other schools: if the incidence of truancy is low in one school, there will be other schools in which it will also be low; if it is high in one school, there will be other schools in which it will also be high. Differences between boys and girls were slight in the secondary schools in our sample, so it seems unlikely that gender differences will be much greater in other schools. We feel that it is probable that, in general, schools offering work experience, college experiences, study leave etc will show similar absence patterns to those found in this study, although whether the slight increase in absence before and after official holiday periods shown in some of our schools will exist elsewhere is likely to depend on different school arrangements. Because the pattern of increasing absence being associated with poor performance was invariable in the seven secondary schools, it is unlikely that there are schools in which it will be reversed.

With regard to the other findings, the widespread belief among truants and many of the non-truant pupils that school is boring is also likely to be held by truants in other schools. Other findings, such as that primary school teachers have relatively little experience of truancy and that there is a strong belief among teachers in both sectors that social and home factors underlie much truant behaviour, might well be different in schools whose settings are different from those in our sample. Only a research study large enough to draw upon a random and representative sample of the population can make sound claims for the generality of such patterns.

Notes

[1] The 'average' quoted in chapter three is a 15% absence from a school year with 190 days, which is 28.5 days of absence. Although a drop of 0.05 of a grade per subject may not seem large, for the pupils whose absences add up to more than 1.9 extra days the drop will be greater. For those pupils whose performance is on the borderline between grades the drop will take on additional significance: the differences between Credit and General, General and Foundation awards are important.

[2] The fact that explained absence is comparable in its effects to unexplained absence underlines the importance (with respect to pupils' performance in examinations) of reducing the extent of absence from school of either kind.

3 The extent of variation among schools in the strength of the link between attendance and performance suggests that there is something about individual schools which creates those variations.

4 The number of parents who condoned truancy was thought to be very small: both primary and secondary school staff emphasised that most parents valued education and were supportive of schools, and the truants interviewed said their parents were angry that they had truanted. The main motivation for truancy seems to be pupils' perceptions of school. Truant and non-truant pupils alike considered that school was or could be boring, but the fact that they react to this in different ways suggests that boredom with school is not the only factor influencing truant pupils. However, there may be scope for teachers to reflect on their practice, to see if anything can be done to make learning more creative and interesting.

5 While the statistical analyses are compatible with this belief, which was expressed by both teachers and truants themselves, they also suggest that attendance is not the sole influence on attainment.

6 Although the impact of truancy on non-truant pupils in the schools was not great, some pupils reported a degree of frustration. The effect of other pupils' truancy is therefore important for those individuals.

7 Although truancy was not a major problem in most of the schools which took part in the study, the degree of frustration and sense of added workload reported by staff who had to cope with it emphasises the value to those staff of reducing the incidence of truancy wherever possible.

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Technical Appendix

The purpose of this appendix is to provide those readers who have a particular interest in research method with a full account of the way in which data were obtained and analysed. It begins with an account of how the schools and individuals who provided information for the study were chosen to address them. It goes on to describe the instruments that were devised for data collection and how the information they yielded were analysed, particular attention being given to the statistical analyses used. It closes by reproducing the interview schedules and questionnaires used to gather data from school staff, primary and secondary pupils and parents.

■ The schools

School data were gathered from seven secondary and seven primary schools, located in two Education Authorities. Such a small sample will not yield generalisable data, and this has been recognised. However, within the constraints of the study every care was taken to make sure that the sample was as useful as it could be. Early discussions with Education Authority representatives led each Authority to give us a list of possible secondary schools; each secondary school eventually included in the sample was carefully chosen from that list to ensure that the sample was spread among city-centre, urban and semi-urban areas, encompassed denominational and non-denominational schools, covered different socio-economic areas and included both large and small establishments. We were careful to avoid including schools with features which would have made them unusual in any way. Each of the seven primary schools in the study was associated with one of these secondary schools, and care was similarly taken to make sure that none was unusual. In each case, the issue of whether or not to participate in the study was a matter for the school's own judgement.

■ The qualitative data

Data were gathered through interviews and various forms of questionnaires. In the primary schools, selected school staff were interviewed and pupils gave written replies to questions. At secondary level, information was similarly gathered from selected staff, questionnaires were administered to pupils and a small number of face to face interviews with truant pupils was conducted. Project resources did not allow all pupils or all staff to be involved in the study, so some selection had to be made in both sectors.

All interview and questionnaire themes were designed to address the research questions listed above but were also suggested by other research, in particular that reported in 1977 by the Pack Committee of Enquiry. They were piloted locally before being used in the sample schools. With the permission of those being interviewed, all interviews were tape recorded to ensure accurate analysis; in addition, researchers made notes shortly after the interviews had taken place and transcripts were made of the tape recordings.

At primary level

The primary school element of the study, while important, was never envisaged as being its central component; previous research suggested that truancy was more likely to be a problem in the secondary sector. However, because there are indications, though slight, that children may begin to truant earlier than this, it was thought important to include some data from primary schools. This focused on the P4 and P7 year groups. Very young children, it was reasoned, might not be able to understand the questions put to them, so that obtaining useful responses might be difficult; by P4, this kind of problem was not likely to arise. P7 was identified both because it was the last primary school year and because the passage of time between P4 and P7 would highlight any changes in pupil behaviour that might develop from stage to stage. Pupil data, then, were gathered from a P4 and a P7 class in each school; where a primary school had more than one P4 or P7 class, the choice of which class should be involved was left to the head teacher. Primary school staff interviewed were the P4 and P7 teachers responsible for the pupils from whom data were gathered, and the head teacher. In all, primary school data were obtained from 145 P4 and 154 P7 pupils, seven head teachers, seven P4 teachers and seven P7 teachers.

Interview data

Staff interview schedules were semi-structured around the following themes: the extent and types of pupil absence encountered, patterns of absence, school record-keeping systems, the reasons for pupils' absences, pupil activities when playing truant, the effects of truancy on truant pupils and on others and parental attitudes towards regular attendance at school. Each interview was designed to take about an hour.

Questions to P4 and P7 pupils

For pupils, the essential questions were: had they ever played truant? why had they done so? what had they done on these occasions? We felt it was essential to put these questions in such a way that the children would not be frightened by them, yet would take them seriously. The instruments used to gather this information were developed in-house by the research team, among whom were members with experience of collecting data from young children and gathering information in sensitive areas. Written responses were decided upon partly because individual pupil interviews are expensive both in time and money: neither the project timetable nor its budget gave scope for them. Because the information we required was of a sensitive nature, group interviews were also ruled out at an early stage. However, we felt that children in P4 (about seven or eight years old) would be able to give brief written responses to simple questions, so we set out to design a 'questionnaire' for them. The idea was to introduce the topic of truancy by reading the children a story about a child missing school and basing 'starter' questions on the story. Afterwards these could be broadened to cover other issues. Whatever story was used, ideally it should be the same for both year groups as the data needed to be comparable.

It proved harder than we had anticipated to find a story that would be suitable for both P4 and P7 children, whose content would be interesting yet not encourage them to copy the central character, and which would appeal to both boys and girls from a variety of backgrounds. Running out of time, we wrote a story ourselves, then building on the questions we wanted to ask largely in the form of 'scenarios'. These were very brief story situations in which a fictional child (the scenarios alternated between having a boy and a girl as central character) was given both motive and opportunity for skipping school.

Each scenario was followed by a number of options from which each of the children had to choose one. Most questions required the children to tick a box but some were more open and asked for brief written answers. The intention was that the researcher would read the story to the children, then read each question aloud, giving the pupils time to think and write down their answers to that question before the researcher moved on to the next one. In this way the researcher who administered the 'questionnaire' had the opportunity to make sure the children understood what was being asked, and the pupils had the chance to ask about questions they did not understand. Both the story and its attendant questions went through many versions before being piloted on local children; thereafter it was revised several more times to take account of difficult vocabulary, ambiguities that had gone unnoticed and, in particular, to shorten the time needed for the exercise. The pilot sessions were also followed by discussion with the children who contributed several useful ideas.

At secondary level

In secondary schools data collection focused on the S4 year group. There were two reasons for this. The first is that earlier research, such as that conducted by Raffe *et al* and reported in SOED Statistical Bulletin Edn/E5/1991/9: Truancy in Scotland 1985-89, suggested that truancy is at its highest among S4 pupils. The other is that towards the end of S4, pupils take Standard Grade examinations. The results of these would serve as the reliable and independent measure of performance required by the research in its exploration of the relationship between attendance and performance. Data, then, would be gathered from and about S4 pupils.

Interview data

Staff interviewed were the head teacher, a guidance teacher, chosen because his or her remit included a responsibility for dealing with truancy, and a selection of staff with responsibility for teaching S4 classes. In each school this selection included a mathematics teacher and two other subject teachers drawn from art and design, geography and French. In identifying these, we were conscious of the need to draw from different subject types and to avoid choosing subjects that would be 'weighted' towards either boys or girls. Hence mathematics was chosen as a constant, being taken by all pupils, with Standard Grade results which showed fewer gender differences than did the results for English. Art and design represented the practical subjects and, because of the design element, was considered more likely to attract both boys and girls than alternatives such as technology, which girls rarely opt for. Geography was chosen as it is a science-related subject but less gender-specific than physics, chemistry or biology, and French provided a balance to the practical area represented by art and design. The inclusion of representatives for these subject areas across the entire secondary school sample but for only three subject areas in each school was intended to keep the data base relatively broad but ensure that the workload for each school was reduced.

Staff interview schedules were semi-structured around themes similar to those used in the interviews with primary staff. As far as possible they were designed to provide comparable data to that gathered from the primary sector.

Pupil questionnaires and follow-up interviews

In each school staff helped to identify and bring together a sub-sample of about seven truant pupils and seven 'good attenders' in each school. This sub-sample completed a questionnaire, included in which was a request for an interview if the pupil identified him or herself as having truanted, and a request for permission to contact the pupil's parents. The questionnaires were designed so that pupils who were good attenders and had no experience of truancy completed their input at an early stage, having been routed to a different set of questions from those put to the truant group. Themes for truant pupils were the extent and pattern of their truancy, their reasons for missing school and what they did on those occasions, their perceptions of its effects on them and others and their general attitudes towards school. Good attenders were asked if they would ever play truant, whether others' truancy affected them and for their ideas for combating it. As with the staff interview schedules, these themes were focused on the research questions that were central to the study but were also suggested by earlier research.

When pupils were willing, follow-up interviews of about half an hour's length were arranged. These usually took place at the school although one was conducted over the telephone. They were structured by the questionnaires in that researchers sought to clarify and expand on particularly interesting responses. In view of the sensitive nature of the discussion it was not felt appropriate to tape-record these interviews, although researchers made notes. In all, questionnaires were completed by 25 truant pupils and 51 good attenders. Follow-up interviews were conducted with eight of the truants.

Telephone interviews with parents

A small number of parents of both secondary and primary truant pupils was contacted and interviewed via the telephone. Basic questions for all parents were aimed at finding out whether they had been aware of any truancy in their children, under what circumstances they thought it would be acceptable for children to miss school, and how they regarded truancy in general. In the case of parents of primary school children, the initial contact was made through head teachers. Although we were particularly interested in what the parents of children who had played truant had to say, given the low level of truancy reported for the primary sector it did not seem realistic to limit these interviews to truant parents alone; we therefore asked head teachers to aim for a balance of parents whose children had and had not skipped school at some time. This had the added advantage of providing head teachers with an easier task than singling out the parents of truant children, which might have caused them embarrassment and in any case have courted refusal. Contact with parents of S4 truants was made as described above, through asking permission from pupils completing the questionnaires to approach their parents. The questionnaires also asked these pupils to reveal their parents' telephone numbers. An important feature of this process was that pupils were given guarantees that none of the information they had revealed would be shared with the parents.

There had been some concern among the research team that use of the telephone interview technique would mean that data would be unlikely to come from parents in economically deprived families. While this technique may have limited the amount of such data, within the constraints of the study there were no practical alternatives. As the study was not attempting to secure a fully representative sample the limitation was not considered to be as great as it might otherwise have been.

We had aimed to interview about 14 parents of secondary truants and a similar number of parents of primary pupils. Ultimately, we were successful in interviewing 18, five of whom had children in S4, six of whom had children in P4 and seven whose children were in P7. Our strategy ensured that all five of the S4 pupils were truants. None of the P4 pupils whose parents were interviewed had attendance problems, however, although two of the P7 children did.

The numerical data

In each of the secondary schools, attendance records were used to identify patterns of absence among the 1993/4 S4 year group (approximately 1250 pupils). We were fortunate in that both the Authorities taking part in the study required secondary schools to enter attendance data into the SCAMP system for analysis, and gave permission for us to access SCAMP records; this, and the willingness of SCAMP personnel both at school and Authority level to help, facilitated the research enormously. Had this not been the case, it is doubtful whether we could have made use of existing attendance records in the time available. In one Authority the SCAMP central co-ordinating team provided the required information on disc; in another, equivalent information came from school SCAMP co-ordinators. In either case, the work and time required to do this was considerable.

In addition, the Education Authorities provided us with the 1993/4 S4 year group's Standard Grade results for mathematics and English as soon as they were available. These were then matched against the attendance records for that year group. It had been an original intention to use not only Standard Grade results but also National Certificate and SEB short course awards as measures of performance. However, the very uneven uptake of modules and short courses among the schools – for example, in one school all S4 pupils took one module while in another only one pupil took any – suggested that the policies of individual schools strongly influenced whether pupils were entered for these awards, and that consequently it would be unwise to use them to extend the attainment scale provided by Standard Grade English and mathematics.

For simplicity, in the report we have proceeded as though any change in the joint English plus mathematics grade splits equally between English and mathematics. Because pupils' Standard Grade results in these two subjects correlate, this is not the case on every occasion. The most serious effect of this simplification is found on p.26 the section headed 'Reverse Regressions'. Here the statement 'Pupils who were 0.5 of a grade less able than their peers in mathematics (or English) were likely to be absent for almost 2% of the time more than …' should, more accurately, read 'Pupils who were 0.58 of a grade less able than their peers …' or, taking into account that the regression coefficient was 1.89 and not exactly 2.0, 'Pupils who were 0.61 of a grade less able than their peers in mathematics (or English) were likely to be absent for 2% more …' The same inexactitude occurs when combining (or disaggregating) explained and unexplained absence rates into total absence, but the correlation here is much smaller, so the effect is less. The meticulous reader will notice that these amendments bring the values in Table 5 more closely in line with those in the 'Reverse Regressions' section.

The analysis of attendance was done by categorising the various SCAMP codes used for each half-day's record under four headings; 'at school', 'explained absence', 'unexplained absence', and 'no school'. (These headings are explained more fully below – see 'Terms Used'.)

These analyses yielded data on the extent and type of absences recorded for the pupils in each and all the schools. SCAMP data on attendance are collected each half day. Half day periods are conventionally referred to as 'openings'. Consecutive sequences of openings are referred to as 'occasions'. The percentage figures for absence used in this report are those obtained by expressing the count of 'absent' openings as a percentage of the total number of possible attendance openings for each pupil. Possible attendance openings omit any openings for the pupil that are classified under 'No School' and also any that arise because the pupil started late, after the commencement of term, or left early, before its end.

Analyses of the attendance data against the Standard Grade results were more complex. Performance was measured either by using the English or mathematics Standard Grade results themselves or by adding the two to give a single composite score. The 'no award' category of Standard Grade was omitted from the analyses. The measures of performance were then analysed against attendance, either adding both forms of absence to give a single 'absence' figure for each pupil or keeping the two distinct.

It should be noted that to complement the whole-school attendance records we attempted to obtain from each of the secondary school subject teachers interviewed an estimate of the same S4 group's attendance for mathematics, French, geography and art lessons during the same period. However, this proved difficult. A major reason for this was the timing of field work, which was largely outwith our control. SCAMP data covered the period August-August 1993/4, during which time the pupils were in S4. Interview data gathering could not start until August 1994, by which time the pupils still at school had moved into the S5 year group. Teachers were not required to keep class attendance records over into following years so in asking for estimates of the previous year's S4 class attendance we were asking staff to think back to pupil groups they no longer taught, and for which we could not assume they would be able to check written records. Although teachers were willing to help, many of the estimates given were very rough and ready. An added difficulty was that in some cases staff had retained the previous year's class records and referred to these in providing us with information, so that the data we eventually obtained were a mix of rough estimate and accurate record. Had we been able to match these figures to the SCAMP records for each day, we would have obtained some idea of the extent of concealed truancy; as it was, we judged the quality of the estimated data too uneven to use in this way.

■ Terms used

'Acceptable' and 'unacceptable' absence

As is explained in the introduction to the report, at various points we found it necessary to use different terms in our discussion of attendance and absence. One reason for this is that, although schools were keeping records of attendance under the categories of 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' absence at the time data were gathered, Education Authorities varied in the way they interpreted these categories. If the interview data gathered for the study as a whole were to be meaningful, there needed to be consistency from one school to the next. For this reason staff interviews began by clarifying what kinds of absences the staff found 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable', and these terms were used in the interviews in preference to 'authorised' and 'unauthorised'.

'Explained' and 'unexplained' absence

Analysis of the statistical data required us to adopt another pair of terms, 'explained' and 'unexplained' absence. When work experience, school field trips, study leave and attendance at college were included as authorised absence, and analyses run using that category, the resulting graphs were dominated by the large peaks these forms of authorised absence produced. To remove these peaks, which obscured the real trends in absence, new categories of 'explained' and 'unexplained' absence were created. They sought to capture absence that was not part of a regular school activity but for which some explanation was nevertheless given, such as illness.

To create the 'explained' and 'unexplained' categories, we took as base the SCAMP entries used by the schools participating in this study and allocated them to the categories in the following table.

At school	Explained absence	Unexplained absence	No school
Present	Family/Personal	Unexplained	School closed
Late/Late for registration/Late bus	Holiday	Truancy	Vacation
College	Medical/Dentist	Unreasonable excuse	Off roll/Temporarily off roll
Springboard course	Note	AM period	Attendance exempted
Approved leave	Interview	PM period	Exclusion
Workexperience/Shadowing			In-service
Excursion/field work			
Community work			
Study leave			
Residential school			

The first category, 'At school' consists of entries that we considered as meaning that the pupil was receiving a valid form of education for most of the school day. The last category, 'No school', consists of entries meaning either that the school was not open for educating pupils or that the pupil him or herself was excluded from being educated. The other two categories are explained by the entries listed under them. 'Explained absence' is intended to comprise absences which are accounted for acceptably. 'Unexplained absence' is intended to comprise the complement of these. Whilst there is inevitably arbitrariness in allocating entries to categories and thus room for arguing that some entry should be elsewhere, it should be remembered that the number of pupils entered under some of the more contentious headings will be small and that as the analyses in this report deal with general patterns pertaining to all pupils and not with particular individuals, quite where these entries are placed does not greatly matter.

Statistical terms and analyses

An explanation of the statistical terms used would probably be appreciated by those not familiar with them.

The **mean** is the average value. In the case of Table 5a in the report it is the sum of the percentage time absent for every pupil divided by the number of pupils.

The **median** is the value below which one finds one half of the pupils and above which one finds the other half. That is, half the pupils have a lower absence rate than the median absence rate and a half have a higher rate. For example, the median for School 1 shown in the first line of Table 5a is 3.01. This means that half the pupils in School 1 had explained absence rates below 3.01% (of total time), and half above.

The **central 50% of pupils** is the range of absence over which the middle half of pupils is distributed: a quarter of pupils are absent for longer than the top level of this range, and a quarter for less than the lower level. It shows in a convenient way the range of absence values found. Using the lowest and highest values to do this suffers from the disadvantage of being too susceptible to freak values. Using the central 50% gives a more robust indication of the range.

Correlation and regression analyses

The **correlation** coefficient shows how strongly one factor relates to another. A correlation of zero (0) means that the two are not related; the values taken by either of the factors is independent of those taken by the other. A coefficient of one (1) means that the two sets of values are perfectly related, a change in one being matched by a proportional change in the other.

Correlation coefficients show how strongly two factors are related to each other. When the relationship is more complicated and several factors enter jointly into the relationship, a more sophisticated approach is required. In the present study, for example, regression analysis is needed because explained and unexplained absence, besides relating to attainment, also relate to each other. Pupils with greater explained absence tend to have greater unexplained absence, and this connection has to be taken into account when their influence upon attainment is being analysed.

Regression is a statistical approach to relating the values taken by one variable (factor) to those taken by one or more other variables which influence the first. The single variable is referred to as either the 'outcome' variable or the 'dependent' variable. The input variable(s) is referred to as the 'explanatory' or as the 'independent' variable(s). The outcome of a regression analysis is a set of numerical coefficients that expresses the most satisfactory allocation to each separate explanatory variable of their combined (joint) influence upon the outcome variable.

Standardised English plus maths

Tables 9, 10 and 11 use two measures of attainment. The first was the simple numerical sum of a pupil's English and mathematics Standard Grade awards. The second was a variant on this, in which the simple Standard Grade results were standardised to compensate in part for the different patterns of awards within the two subjects. The basic Standard Grade results in English and in mathematics were standardised to give the same mean grade for each subject and the same spread of grades across pupils. These two standardised scores were then added to give the final measure of attainment.

Note on the data used for the correlation and regression analyses

Data for terms one and two were analysed jointly and not separately. As was noted earlier, absence patterns in the two terms are closely similar; it was therefore reasonable to analyse the combined values.

Twenty-five (25) 'outlier' pupils (pupils with strange combinations of explained absence, unexplained absence and Standard Grade results) were dropped from the data used for the regression analyses. Twenty-one of these received a 'No award' for their Standard Grades, four received some grade. We erred on the cautious side, however, in nominating 'outliers'. The data are largely intact.

About fifty (50) pupils who were graded 'No award' in either Standard Grade English or mathematics were omitted from the regression runs for reasons given in the main report.

Pearson correlation coefficients

These correlations were not used in the report, but for readers with a particular interest in statistics they have been tabulated in Table i.

Note on our using simple linear regression

Insofar as the dependent variable in this study could only range between values of 2 and 16, and given the very large concentration of pupils at the low end of the absence scale, it was thought initially that a simple linear regression would not be satisfactory but that a curvilinear fit would be needed to take these two factors into account. However, the simple plot of mean dependent scores for groups of pupils with increasing levels of absence indicated that such complexity was not required. A linear fit to the data did appear to hold over a sufficiently wide range of the independent variables. We therefore decided to fit simple linear regressions only, and not more complex forms.

Regression results for individual schools.

Tables ii and iii give results for each school individually. The purpose is to show how greatly individual schools depart from the overall trend, but some caution is required when evaluating this as the number of S4 pupils in some schools is not large, the biggest S4 group being 266. Furthermore these small numbers halve when the two sexes are considered separately. Some uncertainty, therefore, attaches to the regression coefficients given in the tables. They are not exact values. The 95% confidence limits on the coefficients give an idea of how uncertain they are.

Pearson correlation coefficients

Appendix Table i: Correlations between various Standard Grade awards and measures of absence ('No Awards' omitted)

(Both sexes) (Boys (Girls)	E Award	M Award	(E+M) Award	PEREXPL	PERUNEX	PERABS
E Award		.744	.905	.291	.277	.368
		.736	.901	.299	.223	.354
		.770	.913	.344	.333	.424
M Award			.958	.342	.334	.445
			.957	.289	.312	.406
			.964	.400	.358	.487
(E+M) Award				.345	.313	.429
				.322	.276	.402
				.395	.349	.471
PEREXPL					.137	.817
					.115	.776
					.169	.849
PERUNEX						.683
						.716
						.664
PERABS						

Definitions

E Award:	English Standard Grade award
M Award:	Mathematics Standard Grade award
(E+M) Award:	Simple sum of English Standard Grade award and Mathematics award
PEREXPL:	The percentage of possible attendances recorded as explained absence
PERUNEX:	The percentage of possible attendances recorded as unexplained absences
PERABS:	The sum of PEREXPL and PERUNEX

Regression results for individual schools

Appendix Table ii: School by school regressions of attainment on absence

	Number of cases	*Intercept (Constant)*	*Absence (explained plus unexplained)*	*Confidence limit (95%) on the absence coefficient*	*Percentage of variance explained*
School 1				(±)	(%)
All	180	6.74	0.103	0.028	22.9
Boys	82	7.64	0.077	0.041	15.1
Girls	98	6.05	0.122	0.037	30.6
School 2					
All	171	5.68	0.153	0.040	26.1
Boys	104	5.59	0.161	0.054	25.4
Girls	67	5.82	0.143	0.059	26.5
School 3					
All	100	6.10	0.111	0.044	20.6
Boys	41	6.86	0.114	0.070	21.6
Girls	59	5.45	0.119	0.055	24.9
School 4					
All	121	5.43	0.166	0.049	27.9
Boys	59	6.07	0.145	0.072	21.1
Girls	62	4.86	0.185	0.065	35.2
School 5					
All	265	4.46	0.106	0.036	11.8
Boys	15	5.07	0.080*	0.085	3.1
Girls	150	3.91	0.128	0.038	23.2
School 6					
All	227	6.59	0.097	0.024	21.8
Boys	107	6.59	0.110	0.039	22.8
Girls	120	6.55	0.089	0.031	22.2
School 7					
All	113	5.06	0.077	0.041	11.3
Boys	52	5.78	0.071	0.067	8.2
Girls	61	4.44	0.084	0.049	16.8

* Not significantly different from zero; i.e., they very possibly have no effect.

Appendix Table iii: School by school regressions of attainment on absence

	Intercept (Constant)	*Explained absence*	*Unexplained absence*	*Confidence limit on explained absence (95%)*	*Confidence limit on unexplained absence (95%)*	*Percentage of variance explained*
School 1				(±)	(±)	(%)
All	6.68	0.112	0.067*	0.033	0.065	23.5
Boys	7.47	0.100	0.034*	0.051	0.073	17.3
Girls	6.06	0.118	0.160*	0.041	0.157*	30.8
School 2						
All	5.73	0.120	0.184	0.064	0.054	28.5
Boys	5.71	0.098	0.218	0.087	0.082	27.8
Girls	5.76	0.142	0.154	0.100	0.072	29.1
School 3						
All	6.12	0.086	0.220	0.056	0.140	23.3
Boys	6.86	0.070*	0.297	0.077	0.175	30.9
Girls	5.38	0.137	0.067*	0.077	0.212	26.5
School 4						
All	5.37	0.105	0.301	0.068	0.110	32.9
Boys	6.23	0.011*	0.278	0.146	0.142	27.9
Girls	4.48	0.134	0.531	0.073	0.270	42.0
School 5						
All	4.50	0.089	0.157	0.049	0.108	12.1
Boys	5.10	0.051*	0.209*	0.104	0.279	3.9
Girls	3.93	0.121	0.150	0.054	0.112	23.3
School 6						
All	6.78	0.042*	0.134	0.040	0.033	24.8
Boys	6.77	0.066*	0.126	0.070	0.050	22.0
Girls	6.74	0.029*	0.143	0.046	0.044	29.1
School 7						
All	4.98	0.092	0.041*	0.057	0.110	11.7
Boys	5.70	0.089*	0.013*	0.084	0.171	9.2
Girls	4.31	0.103	0.043	0.077	0.141	17.3

* Not significantly different from zero; ie, they very possibly have no effect.

When Alec Stayed Off School

1 In the story about Alec, Alec pretended to be ill so that he wouldn't have to go to school.

- Do you think it was right of Alec to stay off school?

  I think it was .... of Alec to stay off school because

  ....

- Have you ever wished you didn't have to go to school?
  Please tick Yes or No

  Yes ☐ 1
  No ☐ 2

- Have you ever pretended to be ill so that you wouldn't have to go?
  Please tick Yes or No

  Yes ☐ 1
  No ☐ 2

- Did it fool your Mum, or whoever looks after you?
  Please tick Yes or No

  Yes ☐ 1
  No ☐ 2

- What other ways might there be to get out of going to school?
  Please write your answer below

  ....

  ....

- Have you ever done any of these?
  Please tick Yes or No

  Yes ☐ 1
  No ☐ 2

- Why might you want to miss school?
  Please write your answer below

  I might want to miss school because ....

  ....

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2 Alec's Mum found out that Alec was pretending and tricked him, so that he had to spend the day in bed. Alec had to take some medicine and didn't enjoy his day at all.

- If you took the day off school, and nobody caught you, would you spend the day on your own or with a friend?

I'd spend the day ....

- What kinds of things would you do?

I would ....

- Have you ever done any of these things?
Please tick one box

No ☐ 1

Yes, once ☐ 2

Yes, more than once ☐ 3

- How old were you the first time you did them?
Please write your answer below

....

3 In the story, Alec's Mum found out that Alec was pretending. She was cross with Alec and made him promise not to do it again.

- Do you think your Mum or whoever looks after you would be cross with you if you pretended to be ill?
  Please tick one box

Yes ☐1
No ☐2

- When, if ever, does your Mum think it is all right for you to miss school?
  Please write your answer below

....

....

....

- When, if ever, does your teacher think it is all right for you to miss school?
  Please write your answer below

....

....

....

What would you do?

We would like you now to read through these three very short stories and answer the simple questions after each one. Remember, we want you to tell us what you honestly think.

Andrew and his homework

4 Andrew wasn't looking forward to going to school. It was a cold Friday morning and today the teacher would be expecting the Maths project that Andrew hadn't yet done. Andrew thought about what he could do to get out of trouble. He thought, "I could leave the house to make it look like I was going to school but not really go in. I could go to the shops instead, maybe Rob and John might come along with me if they're at the bus stop."

- Andrew is thinking of missing school because he has not done his homework. What would you do if you were Andrew?

Please tick one box

Go to school ☐ 1

Skip school ☐ 2

Wait and see if some others were going to skip school as well ☐ 3

Don't know ☐ 4

Something else - please tell us what:

....

....

....5

- Please tell us why you would do this

Please write your answer below

....

....

....

....

Julie and her friends

5 Julie is on her way to school when Paula and Leslie run up behind her and say, "We're going to the park and then to the town centre, are you coming?" They tell Julie that it will be a good laugh and it doesn't really matter if they miss school just for one day.

- Julie's friends want her to spend time with them and miss school for a day. What would you do if you were Julie?

Please tick one box

Go to school ☐ 1

Skip school ☐ 2

Don't know ☐ 3

Something else - please tell us what:

....

....

....5

- Please tell us why you would do this

Please write your answer below

....

....

....

....

....

Andrew and the bullies

6 Andrew is frightened to go to school today because some children in his class have been picking on him . At play time they push Andrew around and take his sweets. Andrew thinks that it might be better if he did not go to school. He could just hang around instead.

- Andrew is thinking of missing school so that he will not be bullied. What would you do if you were Andrew?

Please tick one box

Go to school ☐1

Skip school ☐2

Tell a teacher that you're being bullied ☐3

Don't know ☐4

Something else - please tell us what:

....

....

....5

- Please tell us why you would do this

Please write your answer below

....

....

....

....

....

Julie helps her mum

7 Julie's Mum has had to stay in the house all day to look after Billy, Julie's little brother who is not feeling too well. Because Julie's Mum has had to stay in she can't go out to get some shopping, so she has asked Julie to go to the corner shop to get a few things. She says that if Julie wants she can stay off for the rest of the day and help with other jobs around the house.

- Julie's Mum has asked her to stay off and help out around the house. What would you do if you were Julie?

Please tick one box

Tell your Mum that you don't want to do the shopping because you have to go to school ☐ 1

Do the shopping for Mum, then go to school late ☐ 2

Do the shopping for Mum, then stay at home ☐ 3

Don't know ☐ 4

Something else - please tell us what:

....

....

.... 5

- Please tell us why you would do this

Please write your answer below

....

....

....

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Andrew and his teacher

8 Andrew doesn't like his teacher Mr Smith. Everything Andrew does seems to annoy Mr Smith. This teacher seems to always pick on Andrew and make him answer questions in class or to tell him off for talking. Andrew feels so upset that he thinks that it would be better if he just didn't go into school. This would mean he did not have to see Mr Smith.

- Andrew is thinking about skipping school because he does not like the way his teacher tells him off all of the time. What would you do if you were Andrew?

Please tick one box

Go to school ☐1

Skip school ☐2

Tell your Mum that you didn't like the teacher and could she help ☐3

Don't know ☐4

Something else - please tell us what:

....

....

....5

Please tell us why you would do this

Please write your answer below

....

....

....

....

....

Julie's finding it hard to understand her school work

9 Julie is finding it very difficult to understand a lot of the work she is being taught in class. She is upset about this because the other children are doing better than her and are ahead of her in their work. Some of the children in her class are saying she's not clever enough to be in their class. Julie is thinking of not going to school because she is so upset and worried about not doing well in her work.

- Julie is so upset about not being able to do her school work that she is thinking skipping school. What would you do if you were Julie?
Please tick one box

Go to school and keep trying on your own ☐1

Skip school ☐2

Go to school and tell your Mum or the teacher that you need some help with your work ☐3

Don't know ☐4

Something else - please tell us what:

....

....

....5

Please tell us why you would do this
Please write your answer below

....

....

....

....

....

Some questions about yourself

Finally, could you please answer these questions about yourself?

10 Can you first tell us how old you are?

Please write your age in the space below

____

11 Are you a boy or a girl?

Please tick a box

Boy ☐1 Girl ☐2

12 What do you think we could to make sure everyone enjoyed being at school?

Please write your answer below

....

....

....

....

....

This is the end of our questions. We would like to thank you very much for helping us.

THANK YOU.

UNDERSTANDING NON-ATTENDANCE
PRIMARY INTERVIEW SCHEDULE, HEAD TEACHER

School:

Level of unsatisfactory absence in school, and head teacher's interpretation of it

1. Have any pupils in the school been absent this year for reasons which you would say were unsatisfactory?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:

About how many?

Which year groups were they in? *(Probe: Were they in any particular year groups?)*

What did you think was unsatisfactory about the reasons offered for absence? Can you give me some examples?

2. Are there other kinds of absences would you would say were unsatisfactory?

3. What kinds of absences do you consider to be acceptable? *(Probe: is proof required? What sort?)*

4. In saying this, do you have in mind a school or Regional policy concerning absences and attendance, or the SOED classification in Circular 8/94? *(Probe: Is there a school policy on non-attendance?)*

Patterns of absence

5. Have you been aware of any pattern to the absences we've been discussing (e.g. weeks at a time, days, half-days, specific days such as Mondays ...)

YES ☐ NO ☐

(Make a note of the pattern or patterns)

If YES:
Have you any explanations for the pattern(s)?

6. Did any of these pupils have a 'track record' of unsatisfactory absence?
YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
Can you remember when it/they started?

7. Do you expect any of these pupils to be absent in the same way again?
YES ☐ NO ☐

School record keeping system

8. Are records kept of these absences at school level?
YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
What kinds of records?

What is done with them?

9. How does the school record attendance generally?

10. How is unacceptable absence dealt with?

11. How satisfied are you with the system (a) of recording attendance and (b) of dealing with unacceptable absence? *(Probe: How might the system be improved?)*

(a) recording attendance

Satisfied ☐ Not satisfied ☐

Because:

(b) dealing with unacceptable absence

Satisfied ☐ Not satisfied ☐

Because:

Reasons for absence

12. In general, do you have any knowledge or ideas about why pupils stay away from school (when you would consider it to be unacceptable)?

What do they do?

13. Do you have any ideas about what these pupils do when they aren't here at school?

Effects on them

14. Do you think that being absent affects them in any way? *(Probe: their work; their relationships with other children,with teachers. Get examples.)*

15. How important do you think these effects are? Why do you think this?

16. At what level of absence would you start to feel concerned about its effects on a pupil? Why then?*(Probe: after one day? Two days? A week? a series of days or weeks?)*

Effects on you

17. Does it affect you as a head teacher when pupils are away through these kinds of unacceptable absences?

YES ☐ NO ☐

How?

Effects on the school

18. Do you think it affects the other pupils / the school?

YES ☐ NO ☐

How?

19. Do you think any of the effects we've been talking about are different in any way from effects brought about by pupils being absent for acceptable reasons such as long-term illness?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
In what way (are they different)?

Parent knowledge

20. How aware of it do you think parents are when their children skip school?

21. What attitudes among parents have you encountered towards unsatisfactory absences?

What can be done?

22. Have you yourself tried anything out, to encourage pupils with a record of unsatisfactory absence to attend regularly?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
What? *(Probe: Was this at school level, or tried with individual pupils?)*

How successful do you think it was?

23. Has the school liaised with other agencies to encourage pupils to attend?

24. Is there anything you think the Government, the Region, the school or you personally might do about unacceptable pupil absences?

25. How important do you think the problem of absenteeism is in this school, in comparison with other problems?

26. Is there anything that you would like to add to what we've been talking about?

Thank you for helping us.

UNDERSTANDING NON-ATTENDANCE
PRIMARY INTERVIEW SCHEDULE, P4 AND P7 TEACHERS

School:

Teacher Name: P4 P7 (circle as appropriate)

Level of unsatisfactory absence in class, and teacher's interpretation of it

1. Have any pupils in your class been absent this year for reasons which you would say were unsatisfactory?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
About how many?

What did you think was unsatisfactory about the reasons offered for absence? Can you give me some examples?

Patterns of absence

2. Was there any pattern to the absences (e.g. weeks at a time, days, half-days, specific days such as Mondays ...)

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
Have you any explanation for the patterns?

3. Do you know if these pupils had been absent from school in this unsatisfactory way before they reached P4 / P7?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
Can you remember when it/ they started?

4. Do you expect them to be absent again?

YES ☐ NO ☐

5. Do you keep any records of these absences?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
What kinds of records?

What do you do with them?

Reasons for absence
6. Do you have any knowledge or ideas about why these pupils stayed away from school?

What do they do?
7. Do you have any ideas about what they do when they aren't here at school?

Effects on them
8. Do you think that having been absent affects them in any way? *(Probe: their work; their relationships with other children, with teachers)*

9. How important do you think these effects are? Why do you think this?

10. At what level of absence would you start to feel concerned about its effects on a pupil? Why then? *(Probe: after one day? Two days? A week? a series of days or weeks?)*

Effects on you
11. Does it affect you as a teacher when pupils are away through these kinds of unacceptable absences?

YES ☐ NO ☐

How?

Effects on the class
12. Does it affect the other pupils/ the class?

YES ☐ NO ☐

How?

13. Do you think any of the effects we've been talking about are different in any way from effects brought about by pupils being absent for acceptable reasons, such as long-term illness?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
In what way (are they different)?

Parent knowledge

14. How aware of it do you think parents are when their children skip school?

15. What attitudes among parents have you encountered towards unsatisfactory absences?

What can be done?

16. Have you yourself tried anything out, to encourage pupils with a record of unsatisfactory absence to attend regularly?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES:
What?

How successful do you think it has been?

17. Is there anything that you would like to add to what we've been talking about?

Thank you for helping us.

Interview Schedule for Secondary School Head Teachers

School:

Head Teacher ID:

Preamble

- Thanks for agreeing to take part in the research
- Explain research is SOED funded but SCRE an independent and objective body; chief aim in this study is to achieve better understanding of non-attendance so that recommendations can be drawn up to help schools address the issues. Research already carried out suggest S4 is a sensible focus because it is an important year in a pupil's life and because non-attendance tends to be higher with this year group than others. Hence our emphasis on S4 in the statistical work and interviews with pupils
- Stress confidentiality: although we will use the information given in our report, respondents and their schools will be kept completely anonymous.

---

1. One hears a lot of explanations for pupil absence, and you will be aware that the concept of 'authorised absence' is a complex one. What types of absence do you consider to be acceptable?

Probe:

work experience
certificated illness
family holidays
school trips or outings

job interviews
presence in court
pre-court meetings
doctor, dentist
exclusions

- In saying this, do you have in mind a school or Regional policy concerning absences and attendance, or the SOED classifications in the Circular 8/94?

Can I turn now to the types of pupil absences that you would consider to be unacceptable?

2. (a) What types of absences do you consider to be unacceptable and (b) why do pupils whose absences fall into this category miss classes?

Probe: Is there anything in their home situation which leads to such absence?

relative expecting them to help out
relative needing to be looked after
money (having to work)
other

Probe: Do you think there could be anything at school that might make pupils miss classes or days?

they want to be elsewhere, e.g. work
they're being bullied
they're being pressurised by other pupils to skip classes
the work's too hard
the work's too easy
they can't fulfil the teacher's expectations
they feel the teacher picks on them
they haven't done homework
they're afraid of the 'late' system
other

3. What would you say were the main effects **on this school** of pupils persistently missing classes?

Probe:

damage to concept of continuous assessment
likely poor performance in exams
gives school bad reputation and - comparisons with other schools
other

4. How important do you think those effects are?
   Probe: Do you think the pupils who skip the classes -
   a) realise the effects their truancy has?
   b) believe those effects are important?

5. How aware do you think parents are of their children skipping school?

6. From your experience (if any) what are parental attitudes to such absences?
   Probe:
   a) Do parents encourage their children to attend?
   b) Have any been in contact with the school about their children's records of absence?
   c) Have you ever attended a meeting with parents about this?

7. How satisfied are you with the way the school records pupil attendance?

8. Do you have any ideas on how this system might be improved?

9. Has anything been done at whole school level to encourage pupils not to miss classes or days at school? If so, what?

   Probe: has this been influenced by Regional and/or national developments and policies?

10. How successful do you think it has been (which schemes stand out)?

11. Has the school liaised with other agencies to encourage pupils to attend?

   Probe: what agencies?
   nature of collaboration?
   how successful has it has been?

12. Is there anything else that you think the Government, Region, the school or you yourself might do about unauthorised absences?

   Probe: how feasible are such ideas?

13. How important do you think the problem of absenteeism is in comparison with other problems schools might have today?

14. Do you have any other comments you would like to make, either about truancy or the interview?

Summarise main points of interview to check accuracy of record of informants' views

Would you mind if I contact you again in connection with this interview in case there is some point that needs clarification?

Finally, I would like to thank you very much for taking part in this research which hopefully will contribute to our understanding of truancy and developing measures to ameliorate unauthorised absences in the future.

Interview Schedule for Subject Teachers
(Maths, Geography and/or French and Art and Design)

School:
Subject Taught:
Teacher ID:

Preamble

- Thanks for agreeing to take part in the research
- Explain research [SOED funded but SCRE an independent and objective body; chief aim in this study is to achieve better understanding of non-attendance so that we can draw up recommendations to help schools address the issues. Research already carried out suggests S4 is a sensible focus because it is an important year in a pupil's life and because non-attendance tends to be higher with this year group than others. Hence our emphasis on S4 in the statistical work and interviews with pupils]
- Stress confidentiality: although we will use the information given in our report, respondents and their school will be completely anonymous.
- We need two sorts of information from respondent: some about the school's system dealing with non-attendance, and some which is more reflective. We begin with the non-attendance information in S4?

Section 1

1. Can I first check that you have received our form concerning pupil attendance and that there have been no problems in completing it?

Section 2: views on non-attendance

I'd like to move now to the more open, reflective questions about non-attendance.

2.1 If we take the S4 pupil absences last year:

- Roughly how many of these were due to causes which you consider to be acceptably explained? (most, half, fewer than half, etc)
- What types of absences do you consider to be acceptable?

Probe for examples

work experience
certificated illness
family holidays
school trips or outings

job interviews
presence in court
pre-court meetings
doctor, dentist
exclusions

- In saying this, do you have in mind a school or Regional policy concerning absences and attendance or the SOED classifications in the Circular 8/94?

Can I turn now to pupil absences that you would not consider to be acceptable?

2.2 What types of absences do you consider to be unacceptable and (b) why do pupils whose absences fall into this category miss classes?

Probe: Is there anything in their home situation which leads to such absence?

relative expecting them to help out
relative needing to be looked after
money (having to work)
other

Probe: Do you think there could be anything at school that might make them miss classes or days?

having to be at school frustrates them - they want to be elsewhere, e.g work
they're being bullied
they're being pressured by other pupils to skip classes
the work's too hard
the work's too easy
they can't fulfil teacher expectations
they feel the teacher picks on them
haven't done homework
they're afraid of the 'late' system
other

2.3 Do you have any ideas about the kinds of things that pupils might do when they skip school?

Probe: Where do they go?
Are other people involved? If so, what people? What ages are they?

2.4 What would you say were the main effects on pupils who skip school of missing classes?

falling behind in class work
poor marks
likely poor performance in exams
endangered career prospects
falling into poor company
becoming involved in crime
becoming involved in drugs
alienation from classmates
alienation from school activities, e.g. school trips, football teams
other

2.5 How important do you think those effects are?

2.6 Do you think the pupils who skip the classes
- a) realise the effects their non-attendance causes?
- b) believe these effects are important?

2.7 Do **unauthorised absences** have any effects on you as a teacher? If so, what kind of effects and how important are they?

hard to plan teaching
hard to direct attention where it's needed
worries about the absentees
worries about the other pupils
other

2.8 Do you think that pupils taking **unauthorised absences** has any effects on those pupils in the class who do not take such absences? If so, what kind of effects, and how important are they?

2.9 What would you say were the main effects **on this school** of pupils persistently missing classes?

Probe:

damage to concept of continuous assessment
likely poor performance in exams
gives school bad reputation
comparisons with other schools
other

2.10 How aware of it do you think parents are when their children skip school?

Probe: what makes you say this?

2.11 What parental attitudes to such absences have you encountered (if any)?

Probe:

- Do parents encourage their children to attend?
- Have any been in contact with the school about their children's records of absence?
- Have you ever attended a meeting with parents about this?

2.12 How satisfied are you with the way the school records pupil attendance?

2.13 Do you have any ideas for how this system might be improved?

2.14 Has anything been done at whole school level to encourage pupils not to miss classes or days at school? If so, what?

Probe: How successful do you think it has been?

2.15 Have you personally tried to do anything to encourage pupils to attend? If so, what?

Probe: How successful do you think it has been?

2.16 Are there regional issues or developments concerning truancy that you find interesting?

2.17 Is there anything else that you think the Region, the school or you yourself might do?

2.18 Do you have any other comments you would like to make, either about truancy or the interview?

Summarise main points of interview to check accuracy of record of informants' views

Would you mind if I contact you again in connection with this interview in case there is some point that needs clarification?

Finally, I would like to thank you very much for taking part in this research which hopefully will contribute to our understanding of truancy and developing measures to ameliorate unauthorised absences in the future.

Interview Schedule for Guidance Teachers

School:
Teacher ID:

Preamble

- Thanks for agreeing to take part in the research
- Explain research [SOED funded but SCRE an independent and objective body; chief aim in this study is to achieve better understanding of non-attendance so that we can draw up recommendations to help schools address the issues. Research already carried out suggests S4 is a sensible focus because it is an important year in a pupil's life and because non-attendance tends to be higher with this year group than others. Hence our emphasis on S4 in the statistical work and interviews with pupils]
- Stress confidentiality: although we will use the information given in our report, respondents and their school will be completely anonymous.
- We need two sorts of information from respondent: some about the school's system dealing with non-attendance, and some which is more reflective. Can we begin with the non-attendance information in S4?

1. There are many explanations for pupil absence; what types of absences do you consider to be acceptable?
   Probe:

work experience
certificated illness
family holidays
school trips or outings

job interviews
presence in court
pre-court meetings
doctor, dentist
exclusions

- In saying this, do you have in mind a school or Regional policy concerning absences and attendance or the SOED classifications in the Circular 8/94?

Can I turn now to pupil absences that you would not consider to be acceptable?

2. What types of absences do you consider to be unacceptable and (b) why do pupils whose absences fall into this category miss classes?

   Probe: Is there anything in their home situation which leads to such absence?

relative expecting them to help out
relative needing to be looked after
money (having to work)
other

Probe: Do you think there could be anything at school that might make pupils miss classes or days?

they want to be elsewhere, e.g work
they're being bullied
they're being pressured by other pupils to skip classes
the work's too hard/the work's too easy
they can't fulfil teacher expectations
they feel the teacher picks on them
they haven't done homework
they're afraid of the 'late' system
other

3. Do you have any ideas about the kinds of things that pupils might do when they skip school?
Probe: Where do they go?
Are other people involved? If so, what people? What ages are they?

4. What would you say were the main effects on pupils who skip classes?
Probe:

falling behind in class work
likely poor performance in exams/poor marks
endangered career prospects
falling into poor company
becoming involved in crime
becoming involved in drugs
alienation from classmates
alienation from school activities, e.g. school trips, football teams
other

5. How important do you think those effects are?

6. Do you think the pupils who skip the classes
   1. realise the effects this causes?
   2. believe the effects are important?

7.1 What would you say were the main effects **on this school** of pupils persistently missing classes?

Probe:

damage to concept of continuous assessment
likely poor performance in exams
gives school bad reputation
comparisons with other schools
other

7.2 Do unauthorised absences have any effects on you personally? If so, what kind of effects and how important are they?
Probe:

hard to plan teaching
hard to direct attention where it's needed
worries about the absentees
worries about the other pupils
stress
other

8. How aware do you think parents are of their children skipping school?

9. From your experience (if any), what are parental attitudes to such absences?

Probe: (a) Do parents encourage their children to attend?
(b) Have any been in contact with the school about their children's records of absence?
(c) Have you ever attended a meeting with parents about this?

10. How satisfied are you with the way the school records pupil attendance?

11. Do you have any ideas for how this system might be improved?

12. Has anything been done at whole school level to encourage pupils not to miss classes or days at school? If so, what?

Probe: How successful do you think it has been?

13. Have you personally tried to do anything to encourage pupils to attend? If so, what?

Probe: How successful do you think it has been?

14. Are there Regional issues or developments concerning truancy that you find interesting?

15. Is there anything else that you think the Region, the school or you yourself might do?

16. Do you have any other comments you would like to make, either about truancy or the interview?

Summarise main points of interview to check accuracy of record of informants' views

Would you mind if I contact you again in connection with this interview in case there is some point that needs clarification?

Finally, I would like to thank you very much for taking part in this research which hopefully will contribute to our understanding of truancy and developing measures to ameliorate unauthorised absences in the future.

UNDERSTANDING NON-ATTENDANCE

The Scottish Council for Research in Education is trying to find out why people do not attend school, or why they miss particular lessons when the teachers feel they should be there. We are very interested in the views of young people like you, and are not taking sides or judging who is right or wrong. We really need to know what you think and things like spelling are not important!

This questionnaire is very important to us. Some of the questions will ask if you have ever missed classes or 'skipped' days at school. Whether you have or not, please answer them as honestly as you can, because the information you give us can help schools to help pupils. For example, it can help teachers to understand what they could do to help pupils with problems which have made them want to stay away, or what they can do to make classes more interesting and enjoyable.

ALL THE INFORMATION YOU GIVE US WILL BE KEPT COMPLETELY CONFIDENTIAL

WHAT YOU WRITE WILL NOT BE PASSED ON TO YOUR SCHOOL, TEACHERS OR PARENTS.

A: ABOUT YOU

1. Are you …

Please tick one box

Male? ☐ 1 Female? ☐ 2

2. How old are you?

14 years old ☐ 1 15 years old ☐ 2

3. Are you still at school?

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2

If YES, please write the school name below:

B: CHOOSING TO MISS CLASSES

1. In the last year, were you ever absent from classes when you knew you should have been at school?

No ☐ 1 ***PLEASE COMPLETE THE BOXED QUESTIONS ON THE NEXT SHEET***

Yes ☐ 2 ***PLEASE GO ON TO QUESTION 2 ON THE NEXT SHEET***

Only for people who ticked 'No' to the last question

- Would you ever miss classes or days at school when you knew you ought to be there?

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2 Don't know ☐ 3

Please explain your reason for ticking YES or NO:

- Does it affect YOU when other pupils in class miss school in this way?

Yes, it affects me a lot ☐ 1 Yes, to some extent ☐ 2 No, not at all ☐ 3

Please explain why it does or does not affect you:

- What do you think could be done to encourage pupils not to miss school? *Please write your ideas here:*

You have now come to the end of the questions we would like to ask you. Thank you very much for taking part in this research.

Please put your response in the envelope provided and either give it to the researcher who is collecting the replies, or post it to SCRE as soon as you can.

THANK YOU.

If you ticked YES to question 1

2. Would you say your absences were occasional or regular?
Please tick one box

Occasional ☐ 1 Regular ☐ 2

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3. On the whole, did you skip days at a time, complete days or particular lessons?
Please tick one box only:

more than one day, including weeks ☐ 1
whole days ☐ 2
particular lessons/classes ☐ 3

- If you skipped **particular** lessons/classes, which were they?
  Please write the lesson or class subject here:

- Did you usually register present at school in the morning or afternoon before you skipped that particular lesson or those lessons?
  Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2 It varied ☐ 3

4. How often did you miss school?
Please tick one box only:

Daily ☐ 1 Weekly ☐ 2 Monthly ☐ 3 Less often than every month ☐ 4

5. Was there a **particular day or days** that you wanted to miss?

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2

If YES: Please put a circle around the day or days:

Mon 1 Tues 2 Wed 3 Thur 4 Fri 5 6 For all

C: YOUR REASONS FOR MISSING SCHOOL

We are very interested in why you have missed classes or days at school.

1. Is there anything about **school** that made you miss classes or days?
Please put a tick by any of the following things, if they are true in your case:

I'm just not interested ☐ 1
I'd rather be earning money at work ☐ 1
Someone was bullying me ☐ 1
The work at school was too hard ☐ 1
The work at school was too easy ☐ 1
I felt I couldn't satisfy the teacher(s) ☐ 1
I think the teachers were threatening ☐ 1
The 'late' system scared me ☐ 1

Were there other things about school that made you want to miss classes or days?
Please write your answer.

2. Is there anything at home which meant you missed classes or days at school? *Again, please put a tick by any of the following things, if they are true in your case:*

I had to look after someone ☐ 1
I had to help with housework or shopping ☐ 1
I had to go to work ☐ 1

Other reasons why you needed to be at home instead of at school:

D: WHAT DID YOU DO WHEN YOU WEREN'T AT SCHOOL?

We would like to ask some questions about what you did when you were away from school.

1. Did you usually miss classes or school with other people or was it on your own? *Please tick one box only:*

Alone ☐ 1 → **GO STRAIGHT TO Q.D2**
In a group ☐ 2
It varies ☐ 3

If you were usually with other people:

How many would there be?

Please tick only one box:

Just one other person ☐ 1
Two more people ☐ 2
Between three and five others ☐ 3
More than five others ☐ 4

Were they …

classmates? ☐ 1
pupils from other schools? ☐ 2
a mix of people? ☐ 3

Were they …

the same age as you ☐ 1
younger than you ☐ 2
older than you ☐ 3
a mix of ages ☐ 4

2. Where did you usually go when you missed school?
Please tick one box only:

Home ☐ 1
Somewhere near home ☐ 2
Somewhere near school ☐ 3
To shops ☐ 4
A range of places ☐ 5

Somewhere else (please say where):

3. What kinds of things did you most often do when you missed classes or school? *Please write in the space below:*

4. What made doing these things better than being at school?

E: MISSING SCHOOL - THE EFFECTS ON YOU

1. Did you ever feel your teachers treated you differently from other pupils because you missed classes or days at school?

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2

If YES:
How did they treat you differently?
Please write in your answer:

How do you feel about this?
Please write in your answer:

2. Do you think your school work was affected because you missed classes or days at school?

Yes ☐ 1   No ☐ 2

If YES:

How was it affected? *Please tick as many boxes as you need:*

Poor marks ☐ 1
Falling behind in class work ☐ 2
Some other way ☐ 3
Please tell us how:

How do you feel about your school work being affected?
Please tick one box

Worried ☐ 1   Don't care ☐ 2

Why?
Please write in your answer:

3. Were you ever told that you could not join in any school activities, eg join a football team or go on a school trip?
Tick one box

No ☐ 1   Yes ☐ 2   Not directly, but I didn't feel welcome ☐ 3

If YES or NOT DIRECTLY:

How do you feel about this?

Please write in your answer:

Did this put you off missing school?

Yes ☐ 1 **No** ☐ 2

If NO:
Why did it not put you off?
Please write in your answer:

4. Do you think skipping school has affected you in any other way?
Please write in your answer:

5. Did you feel the school tried to encourage you to come to school?

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2

If YES:
What was done? *Please write in your answer:*

6. Do you think anything else could be done to encourage pupils not to miss school?
Please write your ideas here:

F: MISSING SCHOOL – EFFECTS ON OTHERS

1. How did other people feel about your missing school?

They were …

	Against it	For it	Not bothered	Don't know
Your classmates	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Your teachers	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Your parents	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4

2. Have your parents ever been to the school because of you missing school?

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2 Don't know ☐ 3

3. How much do your parents' views about you missing school matter to you?

very much	a lot	a little	not at all
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4

H: YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT SCHOOL AND THIS RESEARCH

1. In general, do you like school?
Please tick one box only:

Yes, most of the time	Yes, some of the time	No, mostly not
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3

2a. Please write in below what your favourite classes are:

Why are these your favourites?

3a. What is your least favourite class(es)?

Why don't you like this?

4. Please use the space below if there is anything else you want to tell us about missing school:

5. One part of our research includes talking to people like yourself in a bit more detail. Would you be willing to speak to one of our researchers **in private**?
Please tick one box only:

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2

If YES:
I would be willing to talk to a researcher in private, but not at school ☐ 1
I would be willing to talk to a researcher in private, at school ☐ 2

My name is: ______________________________

Can we contact you…
through the school? ☐ 1
through your home address? ☐ 2
Please write your address (and telephone number, if you have one):
Address:

Telephone number:

6. Would you mind if we spoke to your parents about their views on people who miss classes at school? (**NOT** about your replies to this questionnaire)

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2

If NO: Please write your parents' address and phone number here, if you haven't given it already:

Address:

Tel:

This is the end of the questionnaire. We would like to thank you very much for taking part in this research – you have given us help which will make it easier for schools to help other pupils.

Please put your response in the envelope provided and either give it to the researcher who is collecting the replies, or post it to SCRE as soon as you can.

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THANK YOU

UNDERSTANDING NON-ATTENDANCE
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR PARENTS

Name of parent:

Name of child:

School child is at:

Check that the parent has received our letter about the research.

If not, explain that we are independent researchers based at the Scottish Council for Research in Education, and that we are carrying out a study about attendance at school - how important people think regular attendance is, and what could be done to make it better.

Explain that we have already talked to teachers and pupils, including their [Name of son/ daughter]. We feel that we also need the views of parents if we are to understand how important school attendance is to everyone. [Name of son/ daughter] gave us your phone number and said s/he wouldn't mind if we talked to you.

Stress that all the information anyone gives us is kept anonymous and confidential.

Would they be willing to talk to us for about ten minutes now?

If not now, ask what would be a suitable time: ☐

Can I start by asking you:

1. How important do you think it is that pupils attend school every day they are meant to be there?

important
not important
a few missed days are all right
it depends on what lessons/subjects they get on certain days

1.1. Why is it important/ not important?

pupils need to get certificates
pupils who don't attend regularly will miss work/ do badly
pupils who don't attend regularly will get a bad reputation
school work isn't important
pupils who don't attend regularly will give their school a bad reputation
they don't do anything useful at school
missing school occasionally won't do any harm

2. Can I ask if you are happy with [name's] attendance at school?

Yes
No

2.1. Why are you happy/ not happy?

2.2. If not happy: Have you tried to do anything about it?

Yes
No

2.3. What?

talked to head teacher
talked to form teacher
talked to guidance teacher
talked to Education Welfare Officer/Attendance Officer
coaxed child
threatened child

If poor attendance is indicated - Probe:

2.4. Has the school been in contact with you about [Name of son/ daughter]'s attendance

2.5 Have they been understanding/helpful?

2.6. What do you think s/he does instead of going to school?

3. Are there any times when you would let [name] be at home on a school day or write a note to excuse her/him from school?

didn't feel well
(Probe: would you call a doctor?)

going on holiday
going to the dentist

4. From your own experience of bringing up a child, what are the kinds of things that might put pupils off going to school?

5. Do you ever feel you have to deliberately encourage X to attend school?

Yes
No

5.1. If so, how do you do this?

6. Lastly: do you have any ideas about what could be done to encourage school attendance.

Thank you very much for helping us with this research. We plan to use the information you and others have given us to improve the experience of being at school for young people.

The Scottish Council
for Research in Education

'Research in the service of education' is the motto of the Scottish Council for Research in Education. For over 60 years it has put this into action through carrying out research studies in schools and other institutions across the educational system at all levels from pre-school to adult and vocational education. It also provides a range of associated research, information and consultancy services. SCRE makes many documents arising from its own research available to those who are interested. Reports in the Project Report series are not specially prepared for publication. Enquiries about SCRE publications and services should be directed to Information Services.

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